

Background Briefing—United States

The Great War was the worst tragedy the world has ever experienced. The deaths of millions, the destruction of cities and the creation of new weapons of destruction make the postwar settlements we reach the most important in history. Because of this, we have to approach the peace settlement in a new and more enlightened fashion. We no longer can accept the traditional “balance of power” as the means to achieve and maintain the peace. That approach was destroyed in the slaughter of the Western Front where its inherent flaws resulted in death and destruction. The United States’ entry into the war was based upon making this the last war we ever fight, and the Fourteen Points that acted as the blueprint for peace were developed to achieve that goal.

Our economic support of the British and French during the dark days of the war allowed them to exist even though it meant the destruction of American merchant vessels at the hands of the German submarines. Our loans to both the British and the French allowed them to stave off economic collapse, and we intend to help in their economic reconstruction now that the war has ended. However, our wartime and postwar investments are predicated on their realization that the old ways of international relations are over. The world’s economic stability has to be based upon free trade between nation-states. Because of this, the move towards multilateral means to maintain the peace has to be adopted.

Any attempt to force the Central Powers to pay punitive reparations is bound to lead to more bitterness and should not be attempted. There should be a just peace as we set upon

reconstructing the world to insure that another tragic war will not occur. Germany must be allowed to maintain its economic vitality, just as France, Britain, Italy, and others must be allowed to rebuild.

One main cause of the last war was the resentment that ethnic and national groups felt towards the old monarchical system. The concept of self-rule has to be the driving force in the redrawing of the world’s borders. Where there are ethnic, racial, or national majorities in a geographic region, that group should have the opportunity to rule itself. An example of this would be the “southern Slavic” people of the Balkans where Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, and others were forced to live under the Austro-Hungarian Empire for far too long. Any attempt to thwart national aspirations or to add new colonial holdings from the conquered countries should be defeated.

There has to be absolute “freedom of the seas” to allow the free flow of goods and services. We have seen the importance of this firsthand both in the most recent violation of America’s neutrality during the Great War and the earlier War of 1812. The world has become more connected with the advent of modern transportation and communication and a global economy is a reality. At the same time, the world has become more complicated and deadly, and we have to move away from the archaic concept of “national self-interests” and see the world as a united community. We do not seek territorial gains, colonial holdings, or reparations, nor do we think the new world order should be based upon these relics of the past.