



Woodrow Wilson: A Biography

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Woodrow Wilson was an American politician and academic who served as the 28th President of the United States from 1913 to 1921. Born in Staunton, Virginia, he spent his early years in Augusta, Georgia and Columbia, South Carolina. Wilson earned a PhD in political science, working as a professor and scholar at various institutions before being chosen as President of Princeton University, a position he held from 1902 to 1910. In the election of 1910, he was the gubernatorial candidate of New Jersey's Democratic Party, and was elected the 34th Governor of New Jersey, serving from 1911 to 1913. Running for president in 1912, a split in the Republican Party allowed his plurality, just over forty percent, to win him a large electoral college margin. As President, Wilson was a leading force in the Progressive Movement, bolstered by his Democratic Party's winning control of both the White House and Congress in 1912.

In office, Wilson reintroduced the spoken State of the Union, which had been out of use since 1801. Leading the Congress, now in Democratic hands, he oversaw the passage of progressive legislative policies unparalleled until the New Deal in 1933. Included among these were the Federal Reserve Act, Federal Trade Commission Act, the Clayton Antitrust Act, and the Federal Farm Loan Act. Having taken office one month after ratification of the Sixteenth Amendment, Wilson called a special session of Congress, whose work culminated in the Revenue Act of 1913, reintroducing an income tax and lowering tariffs. Through passage of the Adamson Act, imposing an 8-hour workday for railroads, he averted a railroad strike and an ensuing economic crisis. Upon the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Wilson maintained a policy of neutrality, while pursuing a more aggressive policy in dealing with Mexico's civil war.

Wilson faced former Governor Charles Evans Hughes of New York in the presidential elections of 1916. He became the first Democrat since Andrew Jackson elected to consecutive terms with a narrow majority. Wilson's second term was dominated by American entry into World War I. In April 1917, when Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, Wilson asked Congress to declare war in order to make "the world safe for democracy." The United States conducted military operations alongside the Allies, although without a formal alliance. During the war, Wilson focused on diplomacy and financial considerations, leaving military strategy to the generals, especially General John J. Pershing. Loaning billions of dollars to Britain, France, and other Allies, the United States aided their finance of the war effort. Through the Selective Service Act, conscription sent 10,000 freshly trained soldiers to France, per day, by summer of 1918. On the home front, he raised income taxes, borrowing billions of dollars through the public's purchase of Liberty Bonds. He set up the War Industries Board, promoted labor union cooperation, regulating agriculture and food production through the Lever Act, and granting to the Secretary of the Treasury, William McAdoo, direct control of the nation's railroad system.

In his 1915 State of the Union, Wilson asked Congress for what became the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, suppressing anti-draft activists. The crackdown was intensified by his Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer to include expulsion of non-citizen radicals during the First Red Scare of 1919–1920. Following years of advocacy for suffrage on the state level, in 1918 he endorsed the Nineteenth Amendment whose ratification provided all women the right to vote by its ratification in 1920, over Southern opposition. Wilson staffed his government with Southern Democrats who believed in segregation. He gave department heads greater autonomy in their management.

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