

Instant History

by Chuck Ross

President Wilson tried long and hard to keep America out of World War I. Shortly after his re-election he sent peace notes to the warring powers, asking their terms for a negotiated settlement. Upon receiving unsatisfactory replies, he stated his own terms, insisting on "peace without victory." The German response was resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the sinking of four US ships in February and March 1917. This was too much. Wilson sent a war message to Congress and, on the 6th of April, America declared war on Germany.

The Thirty-Fourth Election (1920)

America was not prepared for war. It would be six months before the first troops of the American Expeditionary Force would go into combat, and more than a year before the AEF was committed in strength. In March 1918, the Germans launched a massive offensive, hoping to crush the Allies before the Americans arrived in force. By July, they had advanced to the line of the Somme, Aisne, and Marne rivers, just 50 miles from Paris. Here, strengthened by fresh American troops, the Allies stopped "le Boche". It was the turning point of the war. The Allies assumed the offensive and slowly drove the Germans back to the Belgium border. In October, the Germans asked for peace.

(1) In addition to military success, what other American initiative helped bring about the Armistice of 11 November 1918?

(2) Wilson's proposal for the formation of the League of Nations was met with approval by our allies. How did it fare at home?

(3) The Republicans believed they could recapture the Presidency in 1920. Who were their candidates, and with whom did the Democrats counter?

(4) Each of the Democratic and Republican candidates for the two top offices had something in common with his rival. What was it?

(5) Who won the election.... and why?

Answers

(1) In January 1918, Wilson made his famous Fourteen Points speech. Eight of these points outlined fairly generous terms for a "just peace", and, although

never officially approved, became tacitly accepted as the Allied position. Defeated in battle, the Germans accepted the Fourteen Points as a condition for surrender. Although the Armistice was signed on these terms, the other Allied powers, Britain, France, Italy, had no intention of letting Germany off the hook so readily. The final peace pact, the Treaty of Versailles, imposed very harsh terms on the Germans. Only the last of Wilson's Fourteen Points, his treasured League of Nations, remained intact.

(2) The USA never joined the League of Nations. At first, the concept had general appeal, but then Wilson made two serious blunders. He hardened political opposition to his proposals by refusing to place any of the leading Republicans on the Paris peace commission. Then, in presenting the Treaty to the Senate for ratification, he would brook no compromise. The Republican majority would not ratify without reservations, ironically fourteen in all, so Wilson took his case to the people. He was not well, but undertook a tour of the country. He suffered a stroke following a speech at Pueblo, Colorado on 25 September 1919. Incapacitated, he finished his term but was unable to govern the country effectively. He died in 1924, a broken, disillusioned man.

(3) The main Republican contenders were Gen. Leonard Wood, the former Army Chief of Staff, and Governor Frank Lowden of Illinois. However, they were deadlocked in the convention, neither could win. Finally, the party leaders adjourned the meeting and, "in a smoke-filled room", selected a compromise candidate, Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio. The Democrats could not nominate President Wilson. He was too ill. On the 44th ballot, Governor James M. Cox of Ohio received the Democratic nomination.

(4) Both Harding and Cox were newspaper publishers from Ohio who had succeeded in politics. There was no other similarity. Harding was an easy-going conservative who believed in "normalcy"; Cox, an energetic, idealistic Wilsonian liberal. Their running mates were also dissimilar with one exception: both would become President. The Republican, Calvin Coolidge, would succeed Harding; the

Democrat, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, became the 32nd President in 1932.

(5) The Republicans buried the Democrats, 404 electoral votes to 127, 37 states to 11. Harding received over 16 million popular votes, 7 million more than Cox. The country was conservative. The American people made the Republicans the majority party during the off-year elections of 1918, and they again repudiated

Wilson's policies in 1920. They admired Wilson for his sincerity and integrity....but he was too idealistic. He was ahead of his times.

Sheehan Reunion

The John Sheehan Reunion will be held Sunday, July 27 at Harmon Field. All relatives and friends are invited. Lunch will be at 1 p.m.

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