

Letter to Financial Times, July 13, 2014

Wilson offered a peace without victory

Sir, The influence of Gen John J Pershing's army and that of its chief, President Woodrow Wilson, on the outcome of the [Great War 1914-18](#) was more indirect and more decisive than Andrew Mitchell lets on (Letters, July 8).

The Germans were persuaded to sign the armistice because Wilson had offered "a peace without victory", suggesting that the outcome of the war had indeed been a stalemate, and that they would be treated as equal participants in the drafting of the Versailles treaty. They had not been persuaded they had lost the war because the allies had declined to occupy German territory. And as Niall Ferguson has shown in *The Pity of War*, they had not actually been defeated militarily on the battlefield.

Gen Pershing wanted to carry the war to Berlin, to drive home the experience of defeat, but had been overruled by the allied leaders, including Wilson. The Americans were fresh and ready to continue the fight, in contrast to Anglo-French exhaustion. And the threat of that possibility entered into the German decision to accept the armistice when they did.

Of course the Germans were treated instead as the defeated power at Versailles and had lost all leverage to claim equality of status because revolution at home had weakened them irrevocably. There was no longer a possibility of them returning to the fight. And Wilson had been outmanoeuvred by Lloyd-George and Clemenceau into accepting German war guilt. Their sop to him was the creation of the League of Nations, an ambiguous achievement as it turned out, but a historic one nonetheless.