A Moral Mission

Wilson's beliefs and the limits of Missionary Diplomacy

USH.C.3.1.H "Examine how President Wilson's ethical and religious beliefs influenced his vision of "Missionary Diplomacy" as the United States of America's moral responsibility to spread the benefits of democracy to emerging nations."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline Wilson's ethical or religious beliefs, circle U.S. actions linked to those beliefs, and number one place where an action conflicts with another country's right to choose.

Wilson's Vision Meets Mexico

1 In 1913, Woodrow Wilson entered the White House with a strong sense that politics should serve a moral purpose. Raised in a Presbyterian household, he believed nations, like individuals, should act according to ethical principles. He argued that the United States should support constitutional government rather than simply protect its trade or recognize any leader who held power. His approach became known as Missionary Diplomacy: he pictured American influence helping other countries build democratic institutions, even though those countries had their own histories and choices.

2 Mexico tested that vision. After a 1913 coup, General Victoriano Huerta took power in Mexico. Wilson refused to recognize his government because Huerta had seized power instead of gaining office through constitutional means. Wilson hoped withholding recognition would pressure Mexico toward a government he considered legitimate. This decision connected his moral belief about rightful government to a diplomatic tool. Yet it also meant an American president claimed a voice in deciding which Mexican leaders deserved acceptance, despite Mexico's independence.

3 In 1914, a dispute involving American sailors led Wilson to order U.S. forces to occupy the Mexican port of Veracruz. People died in the fighting, and many Mexicans saw the occupation as an attack on their sovereignty. Wilson said he sought honorable government, not Mexican territory. His religiously shaped moral certainty could inspire support for democracy while making intervention seem justified. The distance between his stated purpose and Mexico's experience raises a question: Who should decide what political progress looks like?

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Wilson's moral beliefs shape the goal of Missionary Diplomacy?

2. Why did Wilson's beliefs lead him to withhold recognition from Huerta?

3. How could Wilson's stated goal make the occupation of Veracruz seem justified to him?

4. How did the occupation of Veracruz conflict with Wilson's vision of helping other countries build democracy?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a newly independent nation has held a disputed election. Write a four-sentence advice note to Wilson that proposes a U.S. response, connects it to his moral beliefs, and addresses the nation's right to choose its government.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline Wilson's ethical or religious beliefs, circle U.S. actions linked to those beliefs, and number one place where an action conflicts with another country's right to choose. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Wilson's moral beliefs shape the goal of Missionary Diplomacy?	**He believed nations should act ethically, so he wanted U.S. influence to help other countries build democratic institutions.**
2	Why did Wilson's beliefs lead him to withhold recognition from Huerta?	**Wilson believed a government should gain power through constitutional means, but Huerta had taken power in a coup.**
3	How could Wilson's stated goal make the occupation of Veracruz seem justified to him?	**He saw the United States as promoting honorable government, so he could view intervention as serving that moral goal.**
4	How did the occupation of Veracruz conflict with Wilson's vision of helping other countries build democracy?	**Many Mexicans saw the U.S. occupation as an attack on their sovereignty, rather than help in choosing their own government.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would urge Wilson to offer election observers only if the nation invites them. His belief that government should rest on ethical principles supports helping voters cast ballots fairly. The United States should not force a preferred winner into office. Seeking an invitation respects the nation's right to decide its own future.

Accept responses that accurately connect Wilson's ethical or religious beliefs to a diplomatic choice. For the advice note, look for a proposed action and a specific consideration of the other nation's sovereignty.