

## Epilogue: The Legacy of the League

Whether it was a result of his stroke, feelings of moral and intellectual superiority, or an unwavering belief in his own convictions, President Wilson was uncompromising (some have said obstinate) after his return from Paris.

**“As a friend of the President, as one who has loyally followed him, I solemnly declared to him this morning, ‘If you want to kill your own child because the Senate straightens out its crooked limbs, you must take the responsibility and accept the verdict of history.’”**

—Senator Henry Ashurst

Wilson’s foremost opponent, Senator Lodge, also refused to budge. The Senate voted on joining the League of Nations on three occasions. In the first vote the Senators rejected the treaty with the reservations Lodge had written. In the second, the Senate rejected the treaty altogether. When the final vote came up in March 1920, the Senate rejected it again. The Senate fight over the League of Nations and the Treaty of Versailles was over. The United States signed separate treaties later with Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Wilson’s personality may have contributed to the rejection of the treaty. His refusal to include any significant Republicans in his delegation to Paris annoyed Senators. Many

found President Wilson arrogant, and some criticized his tone of voice, which they said was preaching and moralizing. Additionally, the longstanding bitterness and political differences with Lodge ensured that his ideas would be severely scrutinized even before they reached the table.

### The Life of the League

From its conception, the League was to be a multilateral organization which worked toward a goal common to its members: the promotion of international peace and security. League members agreed to deal openly with one another, to abide by international law, to attempt to settle disputes through arbitration, and to reduce armaments in order to prevent war. According to the League Covenant, the League could use verbal, economic, or physical sanctions to prevent a dispute from escalating into war.

Many have speculated about how the rest of the twentieth century would have turned out if the United States had joined the League of Nations. Because Germany and Russia were not initially permitted to join, the early League years lacked the participation of three of the most powerful nations of the world. Despite the fact that ultimately more than sixty nations joined, the League lacked some credibility without U.S. participation. There were, however, some successes.

#### ***What were some of the League’s successes?***

The League was able to resolve several disputes peacefully, just as Wilson had hoped. For instance, the League settled a dispute between Sweden and Finland over a group of contested islands, responded to a humanitarian crisis in Turkey, and prevented a war from erupting over a border conflict between Greece and Bulgaria.

The League was also responsible for some social and economic successes. It brought several social issues to the world’s attention,

### Definitions

**unilateral:** describes a type of action in which a nation makes decisions on its own and executes those decisions without consulting other nations.

**multilateral:** describes a type of action in which a nation considers other nations’ views and works with other nations when executing policy.

such as child slave labor, drug addiction, smuggling, and the status of women. It also provided aid to refugees, extended financial aid to states that were in need, and provided a model for dealing with these and other social issues. Many of the organizations that are part of the UN today, such as the International Labor Organization, the International Court of Justice, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and the World Health Organization, stem from organizations once affiliated with the League of Nations. The League of Nations was the first organization to bring these types of social issues to the forefront of world consciousness.

### ***What were some of the League's failures?***

The League was unable to deal with many other issues and conflicts. Though the League's covenant allowed the use of military force, the League lacked troops of its own, and member nations were not compelled to commit their troops.

As a result, the League lacked a credible military backbone and often lacked the power to enforce its decisions. When the League was called on to intervene in a conflict between Poland and Lithuania over the seizure of a Lithuanian town, the League proved unable to force Poland to leave. The League's powerlessness was apparent on many other occasions as well. For instance, during the League's tenure, Italy seized Fiume, the port that had gone to Yugoslavia, war broke out between Russia and Poland, France and Belgium invaded Germany, and Japan invaded Manchuria.

These incidents exposed the League's weaknesses. Perhaps its greatest problem was that the most powerful nation in the world, whose own president was its greatest champion, never joined the League. As a result of these weaknesses, the members often felt they could violate the terms of the covenant in favor of their own interests. The League members ultimately failed to abandon their unilateral ambitions in favor of multilateralism.

### ***Why did the League fail to prevent World War II?***

The Versailles Treaty had been especially harsh on Germany, and many Germans, humiliated by the Treaty's terms, were eager to reassert themselves in world affairs and regain lands they had lost following World War I. Though some of the terms were softened in the 1920s, the treaty fostered deep resentment and bitterness in Germany toward the victors. The financial compensation the Allies demanded further weakened Germany's war-devastated economy, and caused hunger, hardship, and massive unemployment. German Chancellor Adolf Hitler came to power on a platform which acknowledged German resentment, called for "German" lands to be returned to Germany, and promised economic recovery.

In 1935 the League failed to stop Hitler's public remilitarization of Germany, which had been prohibited in the terms of the Versailles Treaty. In violation of the treaty, Hitler ordered the construction of war planes and military buildings as well as the institution of mandatory military conscription, increasing the German army to 550,000.

On March 7, 1936 Germany again violated the Treaty of Versailles by marching German troops into the Rhineland, a western section of Germany. The militarization of the Rhineland was specifically prohibited in the Treaty of Versailles in order to establish a demilitarized buffer zone between Germany and France. France, alarmed by Germany's actions, took the matter to the League of Nations.

The League responded by issuing a formal condemnation of the action but doing nothing more. Undeterred, Germany annexed Austria and occupied parts of Czechoslovakia. With the onset of the Spanish Civil War, the resumption of war between Japan and China, and Italy's seizure of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), conflict pulled at the world from every corner.

It was Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 that led finally to the collapse of the League of Nations and the outbreak of World

War II. The League, designed to prevent war, had failed in its most basic mission.

The remapping of Europe and the Middle East did not solve the problems that had plagued the continents. Instead, the divisions persisted. Conflicts about borders and nationalities exist to this day. Additionally, the colonized nations of Africa and Asia did not gain independence as a result of the Versailles Treaty. The decolonization movement, begun in the 1950s, brought decades more bloodshed and violence before these areas gained self-rule.

### The United States After WWI

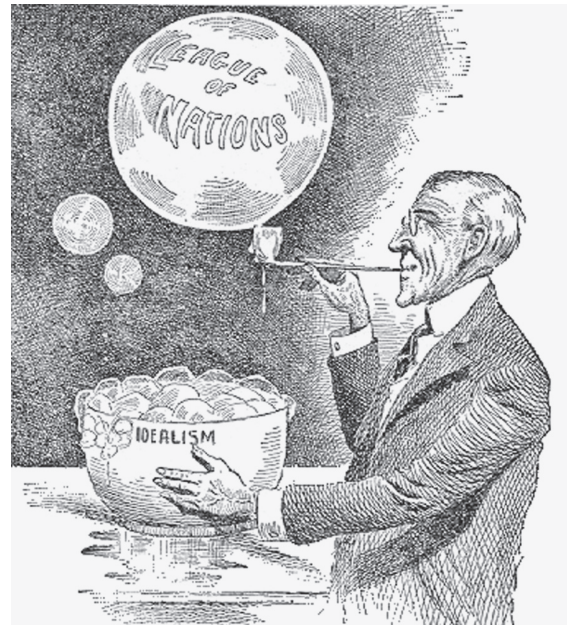
After the war Americans hoped for a long period of peace and prosperity, but they disagreed about the best means to achieve those ends. Like their representatives in Congress, some Americans wanted to return to a policy of isolationism while others felt that detachment was no longer possible. While some Americans were fearful of embroiling themselves in European conflicts and wanted to focus on domestic issues, others felt that the United States was a global power that could not escape involvement in an increasingly interconnected world.

Although the United States did not join the League after World War I, the U.S. Senate as a whole was not isolationist. While some senators were staunchly opposed to involving the United States in “entangling alliances,” many others advocated involvement in international affairs. Their objection to the League was not that it drew the United States into world affairs, but that it impeded the right of the United States to act unilaterally.

#### *What characterized U.S. policies between the world wars?*

Between World War I and World War II, U.S. leaders sought an independent foreign policy which was unconstrained by permanent alliances. The United States was involved in international affairs only in ways that were beneficial or necessary to the United States.

The U.S. handling of British and French



war debts is an example of this approach. At the conclusion of World War I Britain and France believed that the United States would forgive some of their over \$10 billion dollars of war debts. The United States, however, demanded that the debts be paid back in full and did not attempt to come to a compromise with the Europeans. The United States also raised the import tax on some European goods. This action hampered the ability of the Allied powers to repay their debts, and as a result tension and bitterness grew.

The United States also enacted legislation to limit immigration into the country. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924 set limits on the number of Europeans who were eligible to immigrate and declared that Japanese immigrants were “aliens ineligible for citizenship.”

In some cases the United States worked with other nations in a multilateral approach to resolve problems. In 1921 and 1922, the U.S. government held an international conference on Asia in Washington D.C. At the Washington Conference, as it was called, the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and France signed several treaties on international issues. Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Belgium, and China also participated in several agreements.

Some of the most notable accomplishments of the conference included an agreement to curb naval build-up, to settle disputes over possessions in the Pacific peacefully, and to regulate the use of submarines and outlaw the use of poison gas during warfare. All nine nations also signed an agreement affirming China's sovereignty and establishing a policy of open trade with China.

Between the wars the United States acted in ways that supported its interests. While it often was involved in international issues, it participated in ways that preserved its right to manage its own affairs.

## The Cold War

Woodrow Wilson's idea of collective security embodied in the League of Nations Covenant represented the first presidential attempt to adopt a multilateral approach for America's foreign policy. During the twenties and thirties, Wilson's attempts were often mocked as "idealist" and some saw the rise of totalitarian states in Italy, Japan, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany as clear examples of his naiveté. However, with the outbreak of World War II and the horrific loss of life and destruction that followed, Wilson's ideas once again found a receptive audience.

### *What is the United Nations?*

Like the League of Nations, the seeds for the creation of the United Nations were

planted in the midst of a world war. The League, having no military force of its own, had not been able to enforce its decisions. The devastation of World War II caused world leaders to look for new answers. Many, including President Franklin Roosevelt, recognized the League's flaws and felt that the establishment of a new global organization was necessary. Roosevelt worked with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to create the Atlantic Charter, a document which called for the establishment of a United Nations (UN) which would help to maintain peace and security through international collaboration.

While the UN was hailed as a success when it convened its first meeting, the bitter divisions of the Cold War soon overwhelmed the carefully laid plans of the UN's creators. Cold War politics coupled with the structure of the UN veto system often prevented the UN Security Council from making decisions.

### *How did the Cold War affect multilateral international relations?*

During the Cold War, the strategy of containing Soviet communism guided U.S. involvement abroad. American leaders feared that the Soviets would fan the flames of conflict to gain influence in regions that were identified as vital to U.S. interests. U.S. foreign aid was viewed as a tool for containing the spread of communism. It was for this reason that the United States allocated some \$400 million (\$3.4 billion in 2006 dollars) of aid to

## The UN Security Council

The United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, France, and China are the permanent members of the UN's Security Council, the UN's executive body. The Security Council has the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. Each of the five permanent members of the Security Council has the right to veto UN decisions. The veto system was conceived as a safety valve that would allow the great powers to disagree without threatening the UN's existence.

The framers of the UN recognized the division between Soviet communism and the free-market democracies of the West (led by the United States, Britain, and France). Nonetheless, they hoped that the permanent members of the Security Council would share a common interest in maintaining global peace. The founders of the UN also understood that the support of every important country was essential to the organization's success.

Greece and Turkey in 1947 and then some \$13 billion (\$109 billion in 2006) of aid to western European countries in the European Recovery Program, commonly known as the Marshall Plan.

The containment of the Soviet Union provided the impetus for the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an organization of states pledging to protect the freedom and security of member nations. Through participation in NATO the United States consented, in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, to the principle of collective security. The wording was similar to that of Article X of the League of Nations Covenant, which the United States had rejected thirty years before.

**“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all...”**

—Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty

Through the successful congressional appropriation of aid to defend Greece and Turkey in the implementation of the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe, and U.S. participation in NATO, America’s commitment to peace and security throughout the world became unmistakably clear. While the UN was sometimes hampered in its efforts, the U.S. maintained an engaged foreign policy throughout the Cold War. Sometimes that approach involved other nations in a multilateral effort, as during the Korean War, and sometimes the United States acted unilaterally, such as during the Cuban missile crisis.

## Wilson’s Legacy

Though Wilson may have failed in the League fight, he ultimately succeeded in bringing the concepts of multilateralism and collective security to the forefront of politi-

cal consciousness. In the early twenty-first century the United States remains involved in foreign affairs and in organizations that embody the ideals found in Wilson’s Fourteen Points. The United States participates in regional and world organizations promoting free trade, and supports nations and ethnic groups seeking statehood and protection from injustice. The United States often assists in reducing conflict around the world.

Some within the United States advocate a more isolationist approach. They say that Wilson’s ideas have continued to fail throughout the century because humans are predisposed toward power politics rather than peaceful diplomacy, and that the United States should focus on its mounting domestic problems. Others comment that ideas such as multilateralism threaten U.S. security by preventing the United States from acting on its own to protect its citizens. They point to the UN’s failure to prevent terrorism or to act quickly in emergencies. While “Wilsonian” thought is praised in some circles, others call it naive and unrealistic.

In many cases presidents and administrations have engaged in both Wilsonian and non-Wilsonian actions simultaneously. President Carter, for instance, called for international efforts to increase human rights while also announcing that the United States would use force if necessary to access Middle Eastern oil. President George W. Bush’s foreign policies are driven by moral arguments as Wilson’s were, but he has reserved the right to act unilaterally to promote his ideals.

The involvement of the United States in global events and organizations remains a source of tension in the United States and around the world, and questions abound about the role of multilateral institutions and the U.S. role in the world. These debates will continue as long as Americans vacillate between pursuing a unilateral or multilateral foreign policy—or whether to be involved at all.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Give two examples of America's unilateralist foreign policy in the 1920s.

a.

b.

8. Wilson's idea of \_\_\_\_\_ embodied in the League of Nations Covenant represented the first presidential attempt to adopt a \_\_\_\_\_ approach for America's foreign policy.

9. In what way is Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty similar to Article X of the League of Nations Covenant?

10. Give two examples of current U.S. foreign policy that are multilateral.

a.

b.

11. Why do some people think Wilson was naive and unrealistic?

