

Fall 1919: The Moment of Decision

Wilson submitted the Versailles Treaty to the Senate in July 1919. The election results in 1918 had brought a Republican majority to Congress, which meant that Republicans could control the pace of debates. Many Republican Senators, Lodge foremost among them, hoped to drag out the proceedings so that the public would become disengaged and withdraw its support of the treaty. Senator Lodge began deliberations on the treaty by reading it out loud, which consumed two weeks. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee also held public hearings for six weeks in another attempt to slow the process. During these hearings American citizens were permitted to appear before the committee to voice their opinion of the treaty. Some spoke about the effect of the provisions of the treaty on their ethnic homeland while others spoke about other segments of the treaty with which they were dissatisfied. Some believed these hearings represented an attempt to stir up opposition to the treaty from “hyphenated Americans”—recent immigrants or people who felt attachment to their ethnic homelands.

At ten o’clock in the morning on August 19, 1919, members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee gathered with President Wilson in the East Room of the White House. Wilson perceived that enough opposition to the treaty existed in the Senate to prevent it from being ratified by the required two-thirds majority. During the meeting he attempted to explain the covenant and the obligations of the United States under the League, hoping that he could persuade them to vote in favor of its ratification. The meeting lasted over three hours but did nothing to sway the Senators. Unable to convince the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of his views, Wilson opted to go on a nationwide trip where he hoped to explain the League of Nations to the American people and put pressure on doubting Senators.

On September 3, 1919, President Wilson set off on a whirlwind tour, giving forty speeches in the space of twenty-two days. The

itinerary of the trip had him traveling throughout the Midwest and to California and then returning to Washington, D.C. via a southern route. As his train traveled through the country, the audiences grew to large numbers. They heard the constant speech about the value of Article X and joining the League of Nations.

“I can predict with absolute certainty that, within another generation, there will be another world war if the nations of the world...if the League of Nations...does not prevent it by concerted action.”

—Woodrow Wilson, September 1919

Twenty-one journalists traveled with Wilson on the train and ran daily stories of the trip. However, the pace of the trip, coupled with his preexisting medical problems, proved to be too much for Wilson physically. On September 25, 1919, Wilson gave his last speech, in Pueblo, Colorado, before collapsing from physical exhaustion. His physician ordered the train back to Washington. Two days later, on October 2, Wilson suffered a stroke. Incapacitated and partially paralyzed, Wilson was unable to continue his campaign to engage the American public on the Senate ratification debate. From his bed, Wilson sent notes to members of the Senate, urging them to support the League.

In November, the Senate met to debate and vote on the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and its controversial League of Nations, which made up the first 26 of 440 articles. The Senate had fallen into three distinct groups. One group supported the treaty as it stood, one group sought to make changes to it in order to maintain the power to act unilaterally in foreign affairs, and one group hoped to reject it altogether, preferring to isolate the United States from European issues. In the coming days, you will have the opportunity to consider the range of options the Senate debated in 1919.

Option 1

Progressive Internationalists: Support the Treaty

The Great War has changed the nature of international relations, and we Americans need to be at the forefront. The Great War has taught us that our old reliance on isolationism and a unilateral foreign policy is no longer feasible. The world has become smaller with the advent of modern transportation and communication. The United States needs to embrace this change. The old methods of rule, centered on the balance of power and wartime alliances, can no longer hold sway. International trade and overseas markets are more and more important to our economic well being. Because of these changes and the fact that our old buffers of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans can no longer shield us from the rest of the world, we must accept the mantle of leadership that has been thrust upon us. We did not seek this role, but we have an obligation to future generations to fulfill it.

The League of Nations will insure the peace by providing economic, legal, and security organizations to address global problems. This “general assembly of states” will offer a place for nations to come together with issues and complaints to be discussed with other members in order to solve problems before conflict occurs. The League’s International Labor Organization would provide a forum for labor disputes to be resolved between workers and business and provide global workers’ rights—a need demonstrated by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The League’s International Court of Justice would provide legal norms by which all countries would abide and to which they would be held accountable. The confusion surrounding the “freedom of the seas” provisions during the War demonstrated the need for international laws to be codified and enforced by an international court.

The provisions in Article X do not require the United States to send forces to every situation. As President Wilson said, “when you have a fire in Omaha, you don’t send to Oklahoma for the fire department.” Furthermore, military force is not the only means to protect the

territorial integrity of the borders drawn at Versailles. Economic sanctions will also be a powerfully persuasive force to coerce belligerents to abide by the treaty. League members, led by its Council, of which the United States would be a permanent member, would assess every situation on its own merit and decide on the appropriate action. In addition, the United States will not assume any control over mandates that have been established by the Versailles Treaty. The Monroe Doctrine, and its declaration of hegemony over the Western Hemisphere, is maintained under the League as is the right of Congress to declare war before U.S. forces would be introduced. The League is essential to the peace of the world, and we must support it.



Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 1

1. The United States should accept the role of leader of nations. The twentieth-century world requires that the United States consider other nations' views and work with other nations when executing foreign policy.

2. The League of Nations will not

demand undue military participation on the part of the United States.

3. The League of Nations and its Council will prevent conflicts such as the Great War in the future.

Supporting Arguments for Option 1

1. Joining the League will put the United States in a leadership position with which it can influence world events to meet our national interests.

2. Without support from the United States the League as a whole will fail

and the world will have learned nothing from its experiences in the Great War.

3. The League of Nations will allow the United States to work for peace throughout the world.

From the Historical Record

Woodrow Wilson, September 1919

“For the first time in history the counsels of mankind are to be drawn together and concerted for the purpose of defending the rights and improving the conditions of working people—men, women, and children—all over the world. Such a thing as that was never dreamed of before, and what you are asked to discuss in discussing the League of Nations is the matter of seeing that this thing is not interfered with. There is no other way to do it than by a universal League of Nations, and what is proposed is a universal League of Nations.”

Woodrow Wilson, September 1919

“All that you are told about this covenant [the League of Nations Covenant], so far as I can learn, is that there is an Article X. I will repeat Article X to you; I think I can repeat it verbatim, the heart of it at any rate. Every member of the League promises to respect and preserve as against external aggression—not as against internal revolution—the territorial integrity and existing political independence of every other member of the League, and if it is necessary to enforce this promise—I mean, for the nations to act in concert with arms in their hands to enforce it, then the council of

the League shall advise what action is necessary.... The point is this: The council can not give that advice without the vote of the United States, unless it is a party to the dispute; but, my fellow citizens, if you are a party to the dispute you are in the scrap anyhow. If you are a party, then the question is not whether you are going to war or not, but merely whether you are going to war against the rest of the world or with the rest of the world, and the object of war in that case will be to defend that central thing that I began by speaking about. That is the guaranty of the land titles of the world which have been established by this treaty.”

Woodrow Wilson, September 1919

“Instead of wishing to ask to stand aside, get the benefits of the League, but share none [of] its burdens or responsibilities, I for my part want to go in and accept what is offered to us, the leadership of the world. A leadership of what sort, my fellow citizens? Not a leadership that leads men along the lines by which great nations can profit out of weak nations, not an exploiting power, but a liberating power, a power to show the world that when America was born it was indeed a

finger pointed toward those lands into which men could deploy some of these days and live happy in freedom, look each other in the eyes as equals, see that no man was put upon, that no people were forced to accept authority which was not their own choice, and that out of the general generous impulses of the human genius and the human spirit we were lifted along the levels of civilization to days when there should be wars no more, but men should govern themselves in peace and amity and quiet. That is the leadership we said we wanted, and now the world offers it to us. It is inconceivable that we should reject it.”

United States Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, 1919

“...It is necessary to remember the lack of such a league in 1914 threw the world into the chaos of this war. Terrified statesmen endeavored to sustain the delicately poised balance of power. They ran here and there, uttering their old-time cautions and speaking with pathetic diligence for what they called a formula that would compose the mad impulses which were threatening to engulf the world. They failed because the means were not adapted to the ends—because in the modern world, things move too fast for the stagecoach diplomacy of the Middle Ages. Had there been a League of Nations then, could Sir Edward Grey have summoned into conference the authoritative representatives of the great civilized powers, and through them have focused the intelligence and the conscience of mankind on the Austro-Serbian quarrel? There would have been gained the priceless moment of mediation which would have enabled the heady currents of racial and national passion to be allayed. Today there would be in all the devastated countries of the world that calm progress which a continuation of peaceful civilization ensures. Billions of wealth, now utterly lost and destroyed, would still be in existence to comfort and enrich the life of nations, and millions of men, women, and children, gunned to death in battle, or carried away by famine and pestilence, would still be alive to enjoy the normal portion of human happiness and to contribute by their labor and their love to the making of a better world.”

Senator Robert L. Owen, November 19, 1919

“This great covenant of the league presents the hope, and aspiration of good men of all nations of the world.... There is one great difference, I think, between those who favor this league and those who are opposed to it. Those who favor the league believe in the common honesty and common sense of mankind.”

Senator Joseph T. Robinson, November 19, 1919

“Membership in the League of Nations is treated, in the reservations, with so little dignity and as such slight importance as to authorize its termination by the passage of a mere concurrent resolution of Congress. This attempt to deny to the president participation in withdrawal by this government from the league and to vest that authority solely in the two Houses of Congress [is] in disregard of the plain provision of the constitution.”

Senator Gilbert M. Hitchcock, November 19, 1919

“How can Senators view this great attempt to organize the world as a joke? Who made these reservations? Did we have any voice in them, we who expected to furnish the bulk of the votes for the ratification of the treaty? No... [Senators who have] declared that [they] will never vote for the treaty in any form [were] influential in making the reservations.... Yes, I believe the time has come, and I urge Senators upon the other side of the aisle who believe in the League of Nations, as I know many of them do, to do something to make it possible for the two sides of the Senate to get together in a final settlement of ratification of the treaty by some feasible means.”

Senator Joseph T. Robinson, November 19, 1919

“Make no mistake about it. The Senate should either ratify this treaty unqualifiedly or upon such terms and conditions as will...enable [the president] speedily to conclude peace by an exchange of ratifications.... It is plain that our self-respecting allies will not accept the terms and conditions which we seek [in the reservations].”

Supplementary Documents

Woodrow Wilson's Speech to Congress, 8 January, 1918

Gentlemen of the Congress:

Once more, as repeatedly before, the spokesmen of the Central Empires have indicated their desire to discuss the objects of the war and the possible basis of a general peace. Parleys have been in progress at Brest-Litovsk between Russian representatives and representatives of the Central Powers to which the attention of all the belligerents have been invited for the purpose of ascertaining whether it may be possible to extend these parleys into a general conference with regard to terms of peace and settlement.

The Russian representatives presented not only a perfectly definite statement of the principles upon which they would be willing to conclude peace but also an equally definite program of the concrete application of those principles. The representatives of the Central Powers, on their part, presented an outline of settlement which, if much less definite, seemed susceptible of liberal interpretation until their specific program of practical terms was added. That program proposed no concessions at all either to the sovereignty of Russia or to the preferences of the populations with whose fortunes it dealt, but meant, in a word, that the Central Empires were to keep every foot of territory their armed forces had occupied—every province, every city, every point of vantage—as a permanent addition to their territories and their power.

It is a reasonable conjecture that the general principles of settlement which they at first suggested originated with the more liberal statesmen of Germany and Austria, the men who have begun to feel the force of their own people's thought and purpose, while the concrete terms of actual settlement came from the military leaders who have no thought but to keep what they have got. The negotiations have been broken off. The Russian representa-

tives were sincere and in earnest. They cannot entertain such proposals of conquest and domination.

The whole incident is full of significances. It is also full of perplexity. With whom are the Russian representatives dealing? For whom are the representatives of the Central Empires speaking? Are they speaking for the majorities of their respective parliaments or for the minority parties, that military and imperialistic minority which has so far dominated their whole policy and controlled the affairs of Turkey and of the Balkan states which have felt obliged to become their associates in this war?

The Russian representatives have insisted, very justly, very wisely, and in the true spirit of modern democracy, that the conferences they have been holding with the Teutonic and Turkish statesmen should be held within open not closed, doors, and all the world has been audience, as was desired. To whom have we been listening, then? To those who speak the spirit and intention of the resolutions of the German Reichstag of the 9th of July last, the spirit and intention of the Liberal leaders and parties of Germany, or to those who resist and defy that spirit and intention and insist upon conquest and subjugation? Or are we listening, in fact, to both, unreconciled and in open and hopeless contradiction? These are very serious and pregnant questions. Upon the answer to them depends the peace of the world.

But, whatever the results of the parleys at Brest-Litovsk, whatever the confusions of counsel and of purpose in the utterances of the spokesmen of the Central Empires, they have again attempted to acquaint the world with their objects in the war and have again challenged their adversaries to say what their objects are and what sort of settlement they would deem just and satisfactory. There is no good reason why that challenge should not be responded to, and responded to with the utmost candor. We did not wait for it. Not once, but again and again, we have laid our whole thought and purpose before the world,

not in general terms only, but each time with sufficient definition to make it clear what sort of definite terms of settlement must necessarily spring out of them. Within the last week Mr. Lloyd George has spoken with admirable candor and in admirable spirit for the people and Government of Great Britain.

There is no confusion of counsel among the adversaries of the Central Powers, no uncertainty of principle, no vagueness of detail. The only secrecy of counsel, the only lack of fearless frankness, the only failure to make definite statement of the objects of the war, lies with Germany and her allies. The issues of life and death hang upon these definitions. No statesman who has the least conception of his responsibility ought for a moment to permit himself to continue this tragical and appalling outpouring of blood and treasure unless he is sure beyond a peradventure that the objects of the vital sacrifice are part and parcel of the very life of Society and that the people for whom he speaks think them right and imperative as he does.

There is, moreover, a voice calling for these definitions of principle and of purpose which is, it seems to me, more thrilling and more compelling than any of the many moving voices with which the troubled air of the world is filled. It is the voice of the Russian people. They are prostrate and all but hopeless, it would seem, before the grim power of Germany, which has hitherto known no relenting and no pity. Their power, apparently, is shattered. And yet their soul is not subservient. They will not yield either in principle or in action. Their conception of what is right, of what is humane and honorable for them to accept, has been stated with a frankness, a largeness of view, a generosity of spirit, and a universal human sympathy which must challenge the admiration of every friend of mankind; and they have refused to compound their ideals or desert others that they themselves may be safe.

They call to us to say what it is that we desire, in what, if in anything, our purpose and our spirit differ from theirs; and I believe that the people of the United States would wish me

to respond, with utter simplicity and frankness. Whether their present leaders believe it or not, it is our heartfelt desire and hope that some way may be opened whereby we may be privileged to assist the people of Russia to attain their utmost hope of liberty and ordered peace.

It will be our wish and purpose that the processes of peace, when they are begun, shall be absolutely open and that they shall involve and permit henceforth no secret understandings of any kind. The day of conquest and aggrandizement is gone by; so is also the day of secret covenants entered into in the interest of particular governments and likely at some unlooked-for moment to upset the peace of the world. It is this happy fact, now clear to the view of every public man whose thoughts do not still linger in an age that is dead and gone, which makes it possible for every nation whose purposes are consistent with justice and the peace of the world to avow now or at any other time the objects it has in view.

We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secure once for all against their recurrence. What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. The program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program; and that program, the only possible program, as we see it, is this:

[The Fourteen Points]

I. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.

II. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.

III. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.

IV. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.

V. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.

VI. The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy.

VII. Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations. No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the nations in the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their relations

with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law is forever impaired.

VIII. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.

IX. A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.

X. The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development.

XI. Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states should be entered into.

XII. The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.

XIII. An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.

XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end. For such arrangements and covenants we are willing to fight and to continue to fight until they are achieved; but only because we wish the right to prevail and desire a just and stable peace such as can be secured only by removing the chief provocations to war, which this program does remove. We have no jealousy of German greatness, and there is nothing in this program that impairs it. We grudge her no achievement or distinction of learning or of pacific enterprise such as have made her record very bright and very enviable. We do not wish to injure her or to block in any way her legitimate influence or power. We do not wish to fight her either with arms or with hostile arrangements of trade if she is willing to associate herself with us and the other peace-loving nations of the world in covenants of justice and law and fair dealing. We wish her only to accept a place of equality among the peoples of the world—the new world in which we now live—instead of a place of mastery.

Neither do we presume to suggest to her any alteration or modification of her institutions. But it is necessary, we must frankly say, and necessary as a preliminary to any intelligent dealings with her on our part, that we should know whom her spokesmen speak for when they speak to us, whether for the Reichstag majority or for the military party and the men whose creed is imperial domination.

We have spoken now, surely, in terms too concrete to admit of any further doubt or question. An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak.

Unless this principle be made its foundation no part of the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no other principle; and to the vindication of this principle they are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything they possess. The moral climax of this the culminating and final war for human liberty has come, and they are ready to put their own strength, their own highest purpose, their own integrity and devotion to the test.