

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 2 Reservationists: Make Changes to the Treaty

The Great War demonstrated that the world is a very dangerous place when nations base their actions solely on their own interests. The idea that the slaughter of the Western Front has somehow changed that basic rule is folly. The terms of the Versailles Treaty do not guarantee that international relations have changed. We are greatly concerned that the allied leaders at Versailles redrew the map of the world. The concept of self-rule, although noble in scope, is based upon idealistic rhetoric that does not represent the world as it exists. We have great concerns that an outbreak of war between the hastily formed new states of Europe and elsewhere could result in Americans having to fight and die in areas completely alien to our national interests in order to fulfill President Wilson’s “obligation” as found in Article X of the League’s Covenant.

Accusations that we are isolationist are completely false. We support America playing an active role in the new world order, and we have no problems accepting membership into a league of nations. However, long-held traditions governing American foreign policy such as “avoiding foreign entanglements,” are just as true today as they were before 1914. Article X, with its declaration that all members would be obligated to enforce postwar borders, violates this principle. President Wilson’s insistence that Article X does not require that American forces be sent every time a conflict occurs sets a bad precedent. What would the world think about the United States if it is asked to fulfill this obligation in a particular crisis, and it decides not to? The dishonor the United States would bring upon itself would cause it to lose international standing. If Europe wants security, we have no problem entering into a security alliance with Britain or France to keep Germany from threatening them again. The “collective security” proposed by Article X is too vague.

Another major concern lies with the protection of American sovereignty. The Versailles Treaty provides for too many instances in which a body other than Congress makes laws concerning the citizens of the United States. For instance, the treaty requires member nations to submit to arbitration, permanently reduce armaments, contribute to expenses of the League, and it regulates future U.S. relations with Germany. All domestic and political questions relating to internal affairs of the United States should be left to the elected officials of American government to decide, not members of any multinational Council. The United States should also be free to enter into any relations with other nations in manners it sees fit. Discussions with the British and French authorities have shown that they will accept our reservations without reopening the entire treaty to discussion as the Wilsonians have charged. It is time to permit America to assume its proper role on the world stage.



Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 2

1. International relations have not changed so drastically as a result of the Great War that nations will act differently from before. The Versailles Treaty is based on idealism rather than reality.

2. Article X of the Covenant of the League

of Nations will compel the United States to fulfill obligations it does not wish to.

3. The United States should not enter into international agreements which infringe upon American sovereignty.

Supporting Arguments for Option 2

1. The treaty is unlikely to pass with a two-thirds vote without the reservations.

2. The American people will support the reservations.

3. The reservations will allow us to choose which of Europe's battles to join: we will retain our own decision-making power.

From the Historical Record

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, August 1919

“Taken altogether, these provisions for war present what to my mind is the gravest objection to this League in its present form. We are told that of course nothing will be done in the way of warlike acts without the assent of the Congress. If that is true, let us say so in the covenant. But as it stands there is no doubt whatever in my mind that American troops and American ships may be ordered to any part of the world by nations other than the United States, and that is a proposition to which I for one can never assent.... I believe that we do not require to be told by foreign nations when we shall do work which freedom and civilization require.... Let us unite with the world to promote the peaceable settlement of all international disputes. Let us try to develop international law. Let us associate ourselves with the other nations for these purposes. But, let us retain in our own hands and in our own control the lives of the youth of the land. Let no American be sent into battle except by the constituted authorities of his own country and by the will of the people of the United States.”

Senator Warren G. Harding, November 19, 1919

“If this ratification is made with reserva-

tions which have been adopted, there remains the skeleton of a league on which the United States can, if it deems it prudent, proceed in deliberation and calm reflection toward the building of an international relationship which shall be effective in the future.”

Senator Irvine L. Lenroot, November 19, 1919

“These reservations do nothing more nor less than to preserve the liberty and the independence of the United States of America.... This treaty has not been read generally by the people of this country; but I say to you that every one of these reservations...when they are read and when they are understood...will be approved of.”

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, November 19, 1919

“They say that if we demand the exclusion of the Monroe Doctrine from the operation of the League, they will demand compensation. Very well. Let them exclude us from meddling in Europe. That is not a burden that we are seeking to bear. We are ready to go there at any time to save the world from barbarism and tyranny, but we are not thirsting to interfere in every obscure quarrel that may spring up in the Balkans.”

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, November 19, 1919

"I cannot personally accede to the proposition that other nations, that a body of men in executive council where we as a nation have but one vote, shall have any power, unanimous or otherwise, to say who shall come into the United States. It must not be within the jurisdiction of the League at all. It lies at the foundation of national character and national well-being. There should be no possible jurisdiction over the power which defends this country from a flood of Japanese, Chinese, and Hindu labor."

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, November 19, 1919

"Then comes Article X. That is the most important article in the whole treaty.... This article pledges us to guarantee the political independence and the territorial integrity against external aggression of every nation of the earth. We ask no guarantees; we have no endangered frontiers; but we are asked to guarantee the territorial integrity of every nation practically in the world—it will be when the League is complete. As it is today, we guarantee the territorial integrity and political independence of every part of the far-flung British Empire.... Under that clause of the treaty we have got to take our army and our navy and go to war with any country which attempts aggression upon the territorial integrity of another member of the League.... Now, guarantees must be fulfilled. They are sacred promises—it has been said only morally binding. Why, that is all there is to a treaty between great nations. If they are not morally binding they are nothing but 'scraps of paper.' If the United States agrees to Article 10 we must carry it out in letter and in spirit; and if it is agreed to I should insist that we do so, because the honor and good faith of our country would be at stake. Now, that is a tremendous promise to make."

Senator Irvine L. Lenroot, November 19, 1919

"Can it be possible that there is a Democrat so partisan that he does not see the necessity of a reservation as to Article 10 relieving us of the obligation of declaring war in an unjust

cause? I am profoundly convinced that if partisanship be forgotten and only Americanism remembered we can agree upon a reservation to this article, now so dangerous to the cause of true liberty, so destructive of American ideals and principles. I care not in what form the reservation is made so long as it does not obligate us to engage in war irrespective of the justice of the cause.... If Senators across the aisle would only forget that President Wilson is the leader of the Democratic party, and remember that this is an American question so crucial, so important to our country, so fateful to its future that consideration of political advantage should not have the weight of a feather in our deliberations—if this could be done, Mr. President, I am confident that we would come to an almost unanimous agreement as to reservations for the protection of the United States."

Senator Key Pittman, November 19, 1919

"When you unmask all of the hypocrisy surrounding this whole transaction, when you see the leaders of the great Republican Party, representing the people of this country, pretending that they are doing everything in God's world to ratify a treaty,... their interest and sincerity and consistency at least are open to suspicion on the part of the people of the country.... [I]f those of you there who are honest and sincere, if those of you there who hold your country above your party, are willing to join us on this side, I feel assured we can get you enough votes to ratify this treaty with reservations that you yourselves would have accepted two months ago.... [I]f you do not cut out of the resolution of ratification those reservations that you know will destroy the treaty, if you persist in that fraud upon the American people and that fraud upon the world, then I tell you there are enough fearless Democrats on this side of the Chamber to prevent its ratification until the American people understand. We may adopt the policy of isolation, and profit; we may decide to remain in an existence of selfishness, greed, and war, but we will not stand for national cowardice, pretense, and dishonesty."

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.