

## 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.

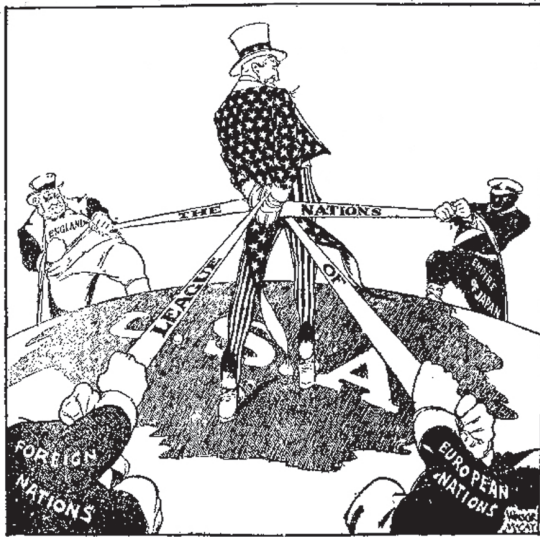
## Option 3 Irreconcilables: Reject the Treaty

Because of Europe's incessant wars of ancient hatreds and power politics, it has always been in our interest to separate ourselves as far as possible from that volatile continent. President Wilson's attempt to make "the world safe for democracy" was doomed from the start as it presupposed that the Europeans and others were actually interested in democracy. Even the British and French with their supposed democratic heritage were not interested in allowing their vast colonial subjects to obtain self-rule. It is obvious from their insistence in maintaining their colonies and adding new ones from the spoils of the defunct German and Ottoman Empires that self-rule was a sham from the start. In addition, we now have the contagion of international Bolshevism that threatens the very existence of democracy throughout the world. The Russian Czars were tyrannical enough, but now Lenin and his gang imperil Europe. Why would the United States want to risk infection from the Bolshevik virus by maintaining a presence in Europe? We've already witnessed labor unrest in this country, and the risk of the "Red Menace" will only increase unless we cut ourselves off from its home base: Europe.

Those who put any faith in "collective security" through the proposed League of Nations are deluding themselves. Membership in any such organization would risk our security and embroil us in constant wars. The same holds true for those who advocate our entering into a security alliance with Britain and France to check Germany's recovery. President Washington's warning about "entangling alliances" holds true more today than ever before. Any loss of American sovereignty and self-reliance is unacceptable. Both the original and the revised versions of this treaty would threaten our sovereignty and send us into war.

The argument that our economic ties to Europe force us to maintain relations with that region also lacks substance. The ever growing Asian trade with the United States seems to be the most logical pursuit if we think that international trade is vital to our continued

growth. There are those that point out that our own domestic markets and those in Latin America are more than sufficient to meet those demands. Why should we risk more infringements on our freedom of the seas by European powers that are always warring against one another? They have never respected our rights as a neutral. Our insistence on such brought us the War of 1812 and the most recent Great War. We saw the end result: 100,000 Americans died to fulfill Wilson's fuzzy, idealistic view of international relations. Have we not learned from our mistakes? The time has come to cut off our relationship with the troubled continent of Europe. We should not ratify the Versailles Treaty.



## Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 3

---

1. Europe is a volatile region which does not share our interests or values. We should not become entangled in its troubles.

2. Asia is a more economically promising trading partner than Europe.

3. Membership in the League would threaten American institutions and perhaps even our Constitution.

## Supporting Arguments for Option 3

---

1. The treaty does not rectify the wrongs present in the world before the Great War. It perpetuates those wrongs and sets the groundwork for another war.

2. Rejecting membership in the League will allow the U.S. government to continue

to function and govern in the way it sees fit, unhampered by outside nations.

3. Removing ourselves from European affairs will allow us to focus on issues in the Americas.

## From the Historical Record

---

*Walter Lippmann, editorial in The New Republic, May 1919*

“The future of liberal Americanism depends upon a moral union between democracy and nationalism. Such a union is compromised so long as nationalism remains competitive in policy, exclusive in spirit and complacently capitalist in organization. Liberals all over the world have hoped that a war, which was so clearly the fruit of competition and imperialist and class-bound nationalism, would end in a peace which would moralize nationalism by releasing it from class bondage and exclusive ambitions. The Treaty of Versailles does not even try to satisfy these aspirations. Instead of expressing a great recuperative effort of the conscience of civilization, which for its own sins has sweated so much blood, it does much to intensify and nothing to heal the old and ugly dissensions between political nationalism and social democracy. In so far as its terms are actually carried out, it is bound to provoke the ultimate explosion of irreconcilable warfare. It weaves international animosities and class conflict into the very fabric of the proposed new system of public law.

*Senator William E. Borah, November 1919*

“If it is conceivable that a treaty can be

formed and a league of nations written which will respect the Constitution in its letter and its spirit, and which will safeguard and preserve the Nation-old traditions of our country, then the matter would pass without any further debate. But, if we join the League, how can we protect and safeguard our own institutions and our own policies, as established by our systems? We can not be entangled in European affairs and not be entangled at the same time. This is not only a plunge into the unknown but also a course absolutely contrary to our previous foreign policy.... There may be some egotism in Congress which makes it believe it knows more than the American people. But this is not true. The American people do not want to protect the other nations.”

*Senator James A. Reed, November 1919*

“There is a quarrel between Italy and Yugoslavia over Fiume, a small Italian town with fifty thousand population. Italy and Yugoslavia cannot settle it. Thereupon the League of Nations undertakes to intervene, and then render a decision, and thereupon it is ordered that the United States shall apply economic pressure, that she shall cease to ship goods to either country. Then war drums begin to roll, and our troops leave their jobs, their farms, their fami-

lies. And suddenly Americans are dying for a fight that they have no interest in.”

*Senator William E. Borah, November 19, 1919*

“My friends of reservations, tell me where is the reservation in these articles which protects us against entangling alliances with Europe? Those who are differing over reservations, tell me what one of them protects the doctrine laid down by the Father of his Country. That fundamental proposition is surrendered, and we are a part of the European turmoils and conflicts from the time we enter this league.... Lloyd George is reported to have said just a few days before the conference met at Versailles that Great Britain could give up much, and would be willing to sacrifice much, to have American withdraw from that policy. That was one of the great objects of the entire conference at Versailles, so far as the foreign representatives were concerned. Clemenceau and Lloyd George and others like them were willing to make any reasonable sacrifice which would draw America away from her isolation and into the internal affairs and concerns of Europe. This league of nations, with or without reservations, whatever else it does or does not do, does surrender and sacrifice that policy; and once having surrendered and become a part of European concerns, where, my friends, are you going to stop?”

*Senator Lawrence Y. Sherman, November 19, 1919*

“This league and treaty, whether reserved or otherwise, are a charter of an international homicide club.”

*Senator Frank B. Brandegee, November 19, 1919*

“We would have had peace long ago if the president had not practically told the other powers that he would not participate in the making of a peace treaty unless they let him put his covenant in as a part.”

*Senator Frank B. Brandegee, November 19, 1919*

“I would not vote for a league of nations based on the principles that this league is

based upon, with all the reservations the wit of man could devise, because it would not be safe for my country.... I would consider myself a candidate for the madhouse if I were to vote for any such thing.”

*Senator Frank B. Brandegee, November 19, 1919*

“As soon as people recover from this pipe dream they will see good, old human nature and cause and effect continue to operate.... I am absolutely convinced if we can survive the present condition of hysteria for a year and keep out of this thing that nobody will admit that he ever favored it.”

*Senator Frank B. Brandegee, November 19, 1919*

“Now I know where I stand; I am on American soil.... I am looking at the stars and stripes [on the] back of your chair, sir, with pride, and I am offered a bridge to cross an unknown sea and invited to take my stand under the sickly flag of international socialism; and I decline to do it!”

*Senator Frank B. Kellogg, November 19, 1919*

“There is another and even more commanding reason why I shall record my vote against the treaty. It imperils what I conceive to be the underlying, the very first principles of this Republic. It is in conflict with the right of our people to govern themselves.... If we have erred we have erred out of too much love for those things which from childhood you and we together have been taught to revere—yes, to defend even at the cost of limb and life. If we have erred it is because we have placed too high an estimate upon the wisdom of Washington and Jefferson, too exalted an opinion upon the patriotism of the sainted Lincoln. And blame us not therefore if we have, in our limited vision, seemed sometimes bitter and at all times uncompromising, for the things for which we have spoken, feebly spoken, the things which we have endeavored to defend, have been the things for which your fathers and our fathers were willing to die.”

## 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.