

Chapter 12

Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations

Surrounded by statesmen who did not agree with him, President Woodrow Wilson lost many of the arguments for his 14 Points at the Peace Conference following World War I. Rather than winning a fair and just peace for all countries, Wilson was forced to settle for one that punished Germany for its role in the Great War. Germany faced a debt it could never hope to repay, surrendered colonies to England and France to rule under the auspices of the League, lost 10% of its land, and had his army reduced to not more than 100,000. The Treaty, however, included Wilson's plan for a League of Nations and a provision that he hoped would end all future wars. Throughout the conference, Wilson never stopped believing that the League of Nations would right the wrongs embedded in the other parts of this Treaty.

When Woodrow Wilson returned home from Versailles, crowds welcomed him as a conquering hero. With the cheers of his countrymen ringing in his ears, it was hard for Wilson to imagine that the U.S. Senate would or could reject this Treaty. But, the President did not know how much the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, and a small band of isolationist Senators disliked his ideals and his Treaty. The battle to ratify the Versailles Treaty, with its provisions for the League of Nations, eventually became a contest of wills between two headstrong and powerful politicians with two conflicting views of America's role in the world.

Although Henry Cabot Lodge found many things wrong with the Versailles Treaty, his opposition focused on Article X of the League's charter which obliged members of the League to defend other members from unprovoked attack. Without it Wilson believed, the League would be merely a debating society. With it, Lodge argued, the U.S. would be drawn into a series of futile wars in the four corners of the world.

This chapter presents the arguments for and against the U.S. joining the League with the controversial Article X intact.

The League of Nations

The idea of establishing an international agency for maintaining world peace has had a long history. While no such organization had been given life in the past, multi-national conferences had spelled out the rights of neutral nations and innocent civilians on land or at sea. When he drew up his famous 14 Points as the basis for a fair, just, and lasting peace, President Wilson made the League his most important goal.

A charter for the League of Nations was drawn up at Versailles with Wilson's enthusiastic participation. It would consist of the world's peace-loving nations and would not allow the participation of Germany (blamed for starting World War I) and Russia (a communist country with designs to overthrow capitalism). The League was to have three branches:

- **A Council and an Assembly to act as a legislative branch.** The Council consisted of the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan as well as the representatives of nine of the smaller nations. All nations in the League had a single vote in the Assembly, where they could

discuss such topics as the “international conditions” that “might endanger the peace of the world.”

- **A Secretariat, which in some ways would act as an executive branch, carrying out day-to-day functions of the League.** The Secretariat, however, commanded no army or navy, and thus could not carry out the wishes or decrees of the Assembly and Council. Its power lay in the willingness of member nations to act in its name. Boycotts were the first line of defense. If these measures failed, member nations would be *asked* to come to the defense of the country that had been attacked.

- **The Permanent Court of International Justice which in some ways acted as a judicial branch.** All members of the League were pledged to refer disputes to this Court or to the League’s Council. In the sense that the Council was also empowered to call for actions from member nations it, too, could be considered part of the League’s judicial branch.

Article X of the League Charter

The part of the League Wilson thought was most important was contained in Article X. This much debated provision stated:

The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve against external aggression the territorial and existing political independence of all members of the League – the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled.

The Fight for Ratification

The fight to ratify the League of Nations boiled down to a battle of principles, ideologies, and personalities between President Woodrow Wilson and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. Lodge began the fight by holding unnecessarily long hearings on the League Treaty and by using such delaying tactics as spending two weeks reading its entire contents aloud before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Realizing he was losing support for the Treaty, President Wilson disregarded the advice of his doctors and proceeded on an 8,000-mile tour of the country in which he gave 37 speeches in 21 days. Toward the end of the tour the exhausted President suffered a stroke which left one-half of his body paralyzed. For two weeks, doctors were afraid the President would die.

Fortunately, Wilson lived – but he never regained his driving energy, mastery of the details of government, or his ability to thrill and stir an audience. For the remainder of the fight over ratifying the League Treaty, Wilson was confined to his sickroom, seeing only those who had the approval of his wife and his doctors. By controlling access to the President, Wilson's wife and doctors, in effect, controlled the kind of advice he received.

The drama over ratifying the League Treaty revolved around the controversial Article X. Wilson believed any changes would make the Treaty too weak to be effective. He believed world peace depended on a U.S. prepared to help victims of unprovoked aggression. Henry Cabot Lodge opposed Article X because he thought it would take away Congress’s power to declare war and give it to the League of Nations. Read the following excerpts from speeches by Wilson and Lodge. Then decide for yourself if the U.S. should have ratified the League Treaty with Article X as Wilson insisted, or if the U.S. should have refused to join the League unless Article X was removed or seriously modified:

Wilson Defends the League

The bulk of the League, contrary to what you have heard, is an agreement that members never will go to war without first having submitted to discussion by the Council of the League of Nations for binding arbitration, or to discussion by the Council. In the case of the latter, each nation agrees to wait six months for a decision, and another three months before they go to war. They agree to cool off for nine months before they yield to the heat of passion which otherwise might have hurried them into war.

If they do not do that, it is not war that follows; it is an absolute boycott of the nation that disregards the agreement. It is the most complete isolation and boycott, and there is not a nation in Europe that can live for six months without importing goods out of other countries. All you have been told about the League is there is Article X in which every member of the League promises to respect and preserve the existing political independence of every other member of the League. If it is necessary to enforce this promise then the Council of the League shall advise what action is necessary. The Council can not give that advice without the vote of the United States, unless it is a party to the dispute.

Lodge attacks the League

Under Article I, if King Hussein (as an example) appealed to us for aid and protection against external aggression affecting his independence we should be bound to give that aid and protection and to send American soldiers to Arabia. It is not relevant to say this is unlikely to occur. The fact that we shall not be called upon does not alter the right, which the King possesses, to demand the sending of American troops to Arabia in order to preserve his independence against the assaults of the Wahabis or Bedouins.

This illustrates the point which is to me the most objectionable in the League as it stands; the right of other powers to call out American troops and American ships to go to any part of the world, an obligation we are bound to fulfill under the terms of this treaty. I know the answer full well — that of course they could not be sent without action by Congress. Congress would have no choice of acting in good faith, and if under Article X any member of the League summoned us, there would be no escape except by a breach of faith. Is it too much to ask that provision should be made that American troops and American ships should never be sent anywhere or ordered to take part in any conflict except after the deliberate (careful) action of the American people expressed through their chosen representatives in Congress? The United States is the world's best hope, but if you fetter her in the interests and quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Why was including the League of Nations with Article X intact so important to President Wilson?
Why was not including Article X so important to Lodge?
2. Do you think the U.S. should have joined the League of Nations with no restrictions to its obligations under Article X? Why or why not?
3. Do you think that either Lodge or Wilson should have been willing to compromise on the issue of Article X?