

## **Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal**

### **Thomas A. Bailey**

*“If you break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep, though poppies grow in Flanders fields.”*

Wilson has been savagely denounced for having made commitments at Paris, which the American people were ultimately unwilling to honor.

The truth is that only the President was in a position to make such pledges for the nation, and that the assurances which Wilson gave, were in line with his war addresses, which the people either had warmly applauded or had seemingly accepted. Wilson erred not so much in making commitments, for commitments of some sort had to be made, as in assuming that the same high degree of wartime idealism would continue indefinitely after the signing of the peace.

But whoever was at fault, the unwillingness or inability of the United States to carry through the promises made in its behalf was catastrophic.

[1] One result was a betrayal of the League of Nations. The newly formed organization was crippled at birth when this nation, the most powerful of its sponsors, left it an orphaned waif on the international doorstep. With the United States in a position to hamstring the boycotts of the League, the League's most potent economic weapon, the other countries had little faith in what they were doing. While preaching peace they prepared for war, they could not hope to carry through a successful disarmament program as long as the United States would have no traffic with them. Under the League ideal there were to be no neutrals: either one was for the League, or one was against it. By not being for it, the United States was against it.

It is possible of course that the League would have proved a failure even with our participation. But that is speculation. It is a demonstrable fact that the League was weakened and demoralized at the outset by the defection of the mightiest of the nations.

[2] Another result was a betrayal of the Treaty of Versailles, or better, the Truce of Versailles. This pact became a different treaty as a result of our desertion, and a much harsher one. Wilson had counted on the Covenant, the "heart" of the treaty, to soften its punitive features and provide a forum for wronged peoples. But the treaty could not work unless the "heart" worked, and the league could not work unless we worked with it.

The two chief instruments for giving flexibility to the Treaty of Versailles were the League of Nations and the Reparations Commission. We spurned the one, while declining representation on the other. The all-important commission then fell under the domination of France, although at Paris it had been assumed that the United States would use its great influence in the direction of moderation. The result of our withdrawal was that Germany was saddled with an impossible reparations burden, which unsettled Europe (and America) economically for more than a decade, contributed to the coming of the Great Depression, and helped prepare the path for Adolph Hitler.

The same sad story must be told elsewhere. The commission for the administration of the Saar was to have been headed by a high-minded American historian, but it fell under the influence of a nationalistic Frenchman, who was made no less nationalistic by fears growing

out of the retirement of the United States. This was the sort of thing that Lloyd George had in mind when he said that the great failure lay not in the Treaty of Versailles but in the failure of the powers to carry out its provisions in the manner intended. To this tragic result the United States, by mere abstention, contributed powerfully.

[3] Another result was a betrayal of the Allies. The United States, by seceding from the victorious Allied coalition, made the first major breach in an alliance, which might have kept the peace. In so doing, we indirectly joined with our former enemy, Germany, against the Treaty of Versailles. If the original entente had been kept intact, Hitler today might be ranting in the beer halls of an un-bombed Munich. Our sins were sins of omission; the sins of Britain and France were sins of commission. But our failure to stand by our associates gave them justification in their own minds for blaming us for many of their ills, and provided a plausible excuse for not acting together resolutely in the face of their common dangers.

[4] Another result was a betrayal of France. Suffering from a security psychosis, the French were stunned by our renunciation of the League, of the Treaty of Versailles, and of the Security Treaty. The resulting state of "jitters" was largely responsible for harsh measures against Germany, particularly the disastrous invasion of the Ruhr in 1923, all of which further aroused German nationalism and provided combustibles for demagogues like Adolph Hitler.

[5] Another result was a betrayal of Germany. The Treaty of Versailles, as noted, became a different treaty from the one which the Germans had thought they were signing. One of the Fourteen Points was a League of Nations, presumably a potent, world League of Nations. It was partly on the strength of such a promise that the Germans laid down their arms in 1918. But through our defection the League was condemned to anemia, and at the outset it became essentially a European league, in large part aimed at Germany, rather than a world league with the United States as a moderating member.

[6] Another result was a betrayal of liberal opinion the world over, not only in England, France, and America, but also in Germany. The black eye given German liberalism helped undermine faith in the Weimar Republic and smoothed the way for Adolph Hitler and other apostles of oppression.

[7] Another result was a betrayal of American boys who had died, and of American boys yet unborn. Those who had died had been assured that their lives were being expended in a war to end wars; those yet unborn had to go over and do the job, a bloodier job, all over again.

[8] Another result was a betrayal of the masses everywhere, particularly the unredeemed minorities who through Wilson had been promised a better world.

[9] Another result was a betrayal of our humanitarian, missionary, and educational interests not only in Europe, but particularly in the Near East. Our retirement from the scene delayed the Near Eastern settlement, and infused new life into the Turks, with resulting disaster to the Armenians and other peoples for whom we had something of a moral responsibility.

[10] Another result was a betrayal of the legitimate interests of American merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and investors. We adopted a policy of ostrichism: trying to play the role of a debtor nation when we were now a creditor nation; seeking to eat our cake and have it too, raising high tariff and other barriers. In so doing we contributed heavily to the economic ills of Europe in the 1920's and 1930's, which in turn prepared the foundations of the Great Depression, which in turn brought in Adolph Hitler.

[11] Another result was a betrayal of America's responsibility to assume that world leadership which had been thrust upon her. First of all, there was a kind of noblesse oblige, an obligation to help the less fortunate. Secondly, there were the dictates of both selfishness and common sense, of playing an active role so as to safeguard our interests and prevent our being dragged into World War II. Instead, we cravenly retreated, while our prestige sank to a new low in Europe, the Far East and Latin America. Instead of trying to control events, we left ourselves at the mercy of events, which inexorably drew us again into their vortex.

[12] Another result was a betrayal of the nation's plighted word and of good faith in international dealings. The world will be long in recovering completely from the shock of our desertion in 1919-1920. The cooperation of the United States had been indispensable for victory; it was no less indispensable for a victorious peace. We achieved the one gloriously; we botched the other ingloriously. Henceforth other nations, in laying their plans for a world order, must choose not what they think is desirable but what they think the political situation in America will permit the Senate to accept. All this makes for world instability, and militates against that maximum of international cooperation, which might otherwise be possible.

The moral is that the ill effects of broken pledges are worse than those resulting from no pledges at all. If our government is so unworkable that we cannot carry through commitments which the President makes and a majority of the people want to honor, then we had better warn other nations in advance, so that they can count on only limited American cooperation, or no cooperation at all.

[13] Another result was a betrayal of our clear moral obligation to finish the job. If we had stayed out of the war in 1917, Europe would have worked out something different if not better, perhaps a negotiated peace. By throwing our power into the balance, we brought victory to one side and prostration to the other, all the while creating problems, which we were morally bound to help solve. Vice President Marshall pointedly remarked that we were like the man who rushed into his neighbor's house to beat off a burglar, and then rushed back home, leaving the victim bleeding to death on the floor. It ill became the United States to sit self-righteously on the side lines during the 1920's and 1930's and blame the Europeans for not solving their problems, when some of those problems would never have been created if we had stayed out altogether, or had not turned away from the plow when the furrow was only half completed.

[14] Another result was a betrayal of the American people. An overwhelming majority of our citizens clearly wanted the League, at least with some reservations. Wilson's instincts were sound when he vainly sought to find some way by which the people might express their will through their government. But our method of approving treaties is so antiquated, illogical, undemocratic, and unworkable that the American people had no mechanism through which to implement their desires. And Wilson's own inflexibility, as we have noted, tightened the deadlock.

In 1919 and in 1920, the American people were willing to forsake the ancient path of isolation, at least with reservations. By the 1930's they were in a different mood, because by that time they saw that the League (which they had helped condemn to impotence) was a failure in preventing aggression by a major power.

This long and disconcerting list of "betrayals" does not necessarily mean that our withdrawal was solely, or even primarily, responsible for all the ills that befell Europe from



1919 to 1939. But it does mean that the United States cannot escape a very considerable share of the blame for what happened.

At the conclusion of the volume Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace, certain general principles were set forth regarding peacemaking. It now seems proper to list a few maxims relating to peace-ratifying and peace-executing.

[1] Politics, in so far as possible, should be kept out of foreign affairs. Nothing should be more nonpartisan than international relations, because what is good for one party is presumably good for both parties and the entire country. This, of course, suggests the counsel of perfection: politics is a bacillus, which laughs at three-mile lines. Yet we should never wantonly throw a delicate issue on foreign affairs into the turbulence of a political campaign. The result is certain to be misleading and possibly disastrous. We must seek senators to match our Mountains, men who will put the good of the country above the good of the party; who will put the advancement of humanity above the advancement of self. We should select senators and members of the House as much (if not more) for their position on foreign affairs as for their position on domestic affairs: the two, as we shall note, are inextricably intertwined.

[2] The two-thirds rule in the Senate should be eliminated. It is the refuge of the filibusterer, the obstructionist, and the devotee of minority rule, all of whom are foreign to a true democracy. This antique restriction adds immeasurably to clumsiness and deadlock in the treaty-ratifying process. In March, 1920 (though not in November, 1919), it was directly responsible for the defeat of the treaty.

[3] A postwar slump in idealism is inescapable in the cold, gray dawn that follows victory. The urge to return to a normalcy that can never be again is age-old; the growth of distrust in

one's allies, once the common cause is won, is inevitable. The peacemakers should never lose sight of these things when they come to design the temple of the future, and not try to attain the unattainable.

[4] Perfectionism is impossible in this workaday world. Our statesmen and our people, whether fashioning treaties of peace or fashioning new world organizations, should seek what will work, not what seems ideally desirable. The League was not perfect. It was, said one critic, only half a League, but it was half a League onward. Even today, after more than a century and a half of experience, our Constitution is far from perfect; yet we have changed it and are changing it.

[5] Compromise may be as essential in peace-ratifying as in peacemaking. Certainly this was true in Washington during 1919-1920. A stubborn refusal to compromise when the people demand compromise not only is undemocratic, but may, as it did in 1920, lead to the defeat of the entire treaty.

[6] Sovereignty is a sacred cow tied across the path of international cooperation. It conjures up all kinds of unwarranted fears. But an impairment of sovereignty, of national freedom of action, is a characteristic of treaties entered into on a free and friendly basis. Broadly speaking, a treaty is a promise to give up, in return for something else, that which we would ordinarily do. The United States has entered into hundreds of international agreements, but our sovereignty is essentially unimpaired.

[7] Effective international cooperation demands a price. That price is the yielding of some small part of our freedom of action, our sovereignty, so that we may, through preventing international disorders, enjoy greater freedom of action. The good things of life may be free, but peace is not one of them. One of the supreme follies of the American people in the post-Versailles years was to demand rights, while shunning responsibilities. We found ourselves in the immoral and disastrous position of seeking all the immunities, privileges, and advantages of riding in the international boat, while refusing to pull the laboring oar of liabilities, responsibilities, and costs.

[8] An excess of suspicions [a Yankee horse-trading trait] is a barrier to international cooperation. Peace can be preserved only among men of good will, for it is a blessing which rests not so much on paper pacts as on attitudes of mind. Peace can no more be maintained by parchment than sobriety can be maintained by constitutional amendments.

In 1919 we were the most powerful and secluded of the great nations, yet we acted as though we were the weakest and most vulnerable. Rich though we were, we feared that we might be asked to contribute one cent more than our proper share; powerful though we were, we feared that a few thousand of our soldiers might be sent abroad to prevent ten million from following them. We confessed by our conduct that our representatives were not intelligent enough to sit down at the same table with those of other nations, even though we had the highest stack of chips and most of the high cards.

If we enter a world organization for peace, eyeing our colleagues distrustfully and momentarily expecting them to try to "put something over on us," then failure is inevitable. There is usually more to be gained through an excess of confidence than through an excess of suspicion.

[9] Domestic affairs are but the obverse side of the shield of foreign affairs. In the 1920's the American people fatuously, sought to crawl into a hole and pull the hole in after them. But they discovered to their sorrow, or at least some of them did, that immigration barriers, tariff

walls, reparations payments, and foreign debts all stir up international reverberations. World depressions leap lightly across international boundaries; bumper wheat crops in the Argentine and Australia bring impoverishment to American farmers. The wars of Europe and Asia have an ugly and inexorable habit of becoming our wars.

[10] It is better to desert one's associates before the peace is drawn up than after. In 1919 we forced the Europeans to adopt a kind of treaty they would not have adopted if we had stayed out. Then we left them in the lurch and loudly condemned them because they could not make our kind of peace work. If we are unwilling or unable to ratify and help execute a world peace, then we owe it to our associates to say so, in order that they may draw their plans accordingly.

[11] Isolationism as a physical fact is dead (granted that it ever existed), even though the isolationists are not. The desire to draw apart and mind one's own business is entirely natural and often commendable. But on this shriveling planet such an ideal is impracticable. With new inventions annihilating both time and distance, the Atlantic Ocean today is far smaller than the Aegean Sea was in the day of Pericles. It is now "One World," and we cannot secede from it. This whirling ball has now become so small that an international quarrel anywhere becomes our business. Wilson recognized all this, and it explains why he fought to the death for his ideal. Since 1689, there have been nine world wars, and the American people have been drawn into every single one of them. This disconcerting fact lends much force to the truism that the only sure way for us to keep out of a great world conflict is to prevent its outbreak. If we are unwilling to recognize that we are a part of this planet, and if we are not utter fools, we had better start preparing for the next world war right now.

[12] Power creates responsibilities. The United States has become so wealthy and so powerful that, whether we do nothing or something in regard to an international organization, our influence will be felt for good or ill, positively or negatively. Aloofness merely accelerates the chaos, which will inevitably engulf us. As long as this power exists, and as long as it will be felt one way or the other, elemental common sense commands us to direct it actively into channels which will be most helpful to the rest of the world and indirectly to ourselves.

[13] The United States, as the richest of the powers, has as vital an interest in world peace as any other nation. Another world war may bankrupt us. In 1919 we prided ourselves on not asking for anything at the peace table, in spurning reparations, which we did not need and mandates which we did not want. But we did have an enormous material stake, and that was in making the peace last. Because it did not last we were forced to incur a debt of over \$200,000,000,000 and mobilize a force of over 11,000,000 men. Compared with this colossal outlay, the cost of making a world order operate would be nothing.

[14] American opinion must be educated to its responsibilities in international affairs. If a new world organization is to work, we as a people must have a better appreciation of our long-run interests and our long-range responsibilities. One of the most formidable barriers to international cooperation is the pursuit of the immediate, short-run advantage to the exclusion of the less immediate but more profitable longer-run advantage. Unless man is willing to labor for the interests of all (which are his long-run interests), unless he is prepared to avoid the selfish short-run pin which hurts his neighbor and indirectly himself, unless he can assume that most people are decent human beings striving toward a common end, then WC might just



*False Security*

(Courtesy of Denver Rocky Mountain News; cartoonist Cory)

as well start preparing to go back into the jungle and up into the trees. There can be no long-range peace without a long-range view.

#### **A few final observations.**

Should the United States have ratified the treaty and joined the League? In the face of the evidence herein presented, there can be only one answer. We had very little if anything to lose, perhaps the trivial expenses of the League; and everything to gain, possibly a preventing of so-called- World War II. No nation was ever trapped in the League, as our isolationists feared: Japan got out, Germany got out, Russia was thrown out. Where the possible losses were so negligible, and the probable pins so tremendous, the United States, as Wilson repeatedly pointed out, was more than justified in taking the chance.

#### **Would the results have been essentially different if we had joined the League?**

The conclusions here must of course be more speculative. But it seems clear that some kind of "slump in idealism" would have come sooner or later, and it may legitimately be doubted whether, when the pinch came, the United States would have provided adequate support for the League of Nations. The events of the 1930's would seem to support such a view, but we must remember that the set of circumstances then encountered might not have come into being if we had joined the League in the first instance.

General Jan C. Smuts said that not Wilson but "humanity" failed at Paris. This is a striking statement that has little meaning, in part because the real failure came after Paris. If a horseman spurs his mount at a twelve-foot brick wall, who is responsible for the ensuing accident: the horse that fails to make the jump, or the rider who has attempted an impossible feat?

A horseman must know his horse and its limitations; a statesman must know his people and their limitations, as well as the limitations of foreign peoples. Otherwise he is not a statesman. He must not set for his people impossible goals, however desirable they may be in the abstract. He must train public opinion by gradations for the new tasks, not try to shoot Niagara all at once. He must educate the people in advance for the responsibility, which he is asking them to shoulder. Otherwise, even though they may temporarily take on the burden, they are likely to find it too wearisome and cast it aside.

Wilson engineered a revolution in our foreign policy when he undertook to lead the American people out of the path of isolationism into that of effective world cooperation. Yet the isolationists, aided by the circumstances set forth in this book, were able to affect a counterrevolution, and take us back into the old paths. But it is possible that this counterrevolution would have come within a few years anyhow; the people were not yet fully ready for a major departure.

The great Covenanter was eternally right in recognizing that isolationism was but a mirage, and that the next war would surely drag us in, and that the new organization for peace had to be based upon justice for all. The stakes were enormous; they were worth giving one's life for. He failed in part because he seems not to have realized that his was a dual task: making a peace and changing a national, perhaps a world, psychology.

Wilson was the greatest of the neutral statesmen, the greatest mediator, the greatest war leader, the greatest peacemaker, the greatest tragedy, and the greatest disappointment. Reaching for the stars, he crashed to earth.

But his was a magnificent failure, and in some ways a successful failure. Wilson once said, "Ideas live; men die." His ideas have lived. The Wilsonian tradition has been kept alive, and countless thousands of men and women have vowed that we shall not make the same mistakes again. We shall know better how to do it next time. We know better our limitations and those of other peoples, for we have before us the successes and failures of the League. We know better what machinery will work, and what will not. We know that a League without teeth is little better than a debating society.

We must never forget that there are two phases to a war: the fighting duration, and the peace duration. Partly because men did not recognize this, the Treaty of Versailles became an armistice, and the postwar era a prewar era. Only a handful of statesmen can actually draw up a treaty of peace. But in a democracy every citizen can actively participate in its ratification and in its execution. Upon him rests a sacred obligation not only to do so but to do so intelligently. The record is there for him to read, and he should read it, with due regard for changed conditions.

We do not want to have to do the ghastly job a third time.