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Wilsonian Liberalism:  
The Struggle For A New World Order

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WILSONIAN LIBERALISM:  
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This paper will attempt to show that Woodrow Wilson prevented a harsher treaty from being agreed upon at the Paris Peace Conference. While failing to implement his liberal peace program, Wilson set up an organization that might have replaced the old world order with a liberal world order. Secondly this paper will look at the Senators known as the irreconcilables and their reasons for opposing the League of Nations.

Woodrow Wilson saw the world as submerged in world politics that was earmarked by the extremes of imperialism and revolutionary socialism.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Wilson saw the "European balance of power system" as a system that simply perpetuated war. Wilson's new diplomacy called for a community of power that was bound by universal obligations. Wilson thought that if the world was demoralized then nations would see that they had common interests and would learn to work together in pursuit of these common interests. Moreover, the world would gradually observe certain universal obligations.<sup>2</sup> Wilson saw an America which was founded on the victory of liberal reforms and as having a moral obligation to lead the world into democracy. For Wilson, then, the treaty and League was the culmination of the American Liberal Reformist mission

that would free Europe from the war producing balance of power diplomacy. It followed for Wilson, then, that only with the United States as a participant in the League of Nations would liberalism be victorious over imperialism and revolutionary socialism. What Wilson envisioned was a new world order founded on liberal reformist values.<sup>3</sup>

To understand why Wilson thought as he did we should familiarize ourselves with the situation in which he found himself. Between March, 1915, and March, 1917, the Allies drew up their war aims in five documents that came to be called "the secret treaties" because they were not permitted to be published. These so called treaties were concerned with dividing up the colonial territories of Germany and the Ottoman Empire. What was important here was that these treaties only advanced the selfish colonial interests of the Allied nations. Wilson was shown copies of these treaties in April of 1917 but refrained from comment at first.<sup>4</sup> On December 4, 1917, Wilson assured the German Empire that the United States was not fighting against the independence of the German Empire and that the United States was fighting for its freedom as well as Germany's freedom from "unjust attack by neighbors, rivals or schemers after world empire."<sup>5</sup> What is clear then is that the Allies and the United States had different war aims and, consequently, had different ideas concerning a peace settlement. Wilson's ideas for a peace settlement became [more clear] when he decided to come up with an answer to the armistice proposed by the Russian Bolsheviks. Russia began armistice negotiations with the Central Powers on Dec. 3, 1917.

The Russians called on the Allies to join in the negotiations but the Allied response was a silent one. On December 15, 1917 an armistice was signed between the Germans and Russians. The Russians had also published the secret treaties that they had found in the Tsar's archives. This shocked world opinion because it revealed that Allied war aims were not as noble as the Allies had claimed. The embarrassed Allies could not agree on a response. Wilson, mindful of the effect that the Bolsheviks had on liberal world opinion, appointed a committee called "The Inquiry" to help come up with an answer to the Bolsheviks. On January 8, 1918, Wilson presented his framework for peace that came to be known as "The Fourteen Points." The Fourteen Points called for an end to secret diplomacy, freedom of the seas, freetrade, reduction of armaments, adjustment of colonial claims while considering the needs of the local peoples, German withdrawal of occupied Russian territory and welcoming Russia in to the society of free nations, restoration of Belgium, the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, adjusting Italy's borders according to nationality, autonomy for the various nationalities in Austria-Hungary, readjustment of borders in the Balkan countries with access to the sea for the Serbs, autonomy for the numerous nationalities in Turkey and free access through the Dardanelles for all, an independent island with access to sea, and finally a general association of nations.<sup>6</sup> The impact of Wilson's Fourteen Points address was generally positive. The liberal world opinion that had been courted by the Russians now focused its attention on Wilson. Allied leaders were happy with the propaganda value of the

Fourteen Points Address, were mindful of the fact that they conflicted with their war aims.<sup>7</sup> The Fourteen Points Address in the United States was to become an important reference point during the treaty debate for both Wilson and those who opposed the treaty. It was significant that when Wilson made the Fourteen Points Address it drew little negative comment.<sup>8</sup> It is important to see that Wilson was not a blind visionary in regard to the Fourteen Points. He knew that they could not be fully implemented overnight. For example, Wilson told French Ambassador Jean Jules Jusserand that he knew the proposed League of Nations would be something that slowly evolved. Furthermore, Wilson envisioned a collective security system that would obligate nations to take disputes to the League. Hopefully the League would establish precedents that would break the habit of settling disputes with guns.<sup>9</sup>

Next we must turn to the peace negotiations at Paris to see how Wilson prevented a much harsher treaty from being agreed upon. The Germans, with Allied armies near her borders, agreed to accept the Fourteen Points as a basis for negotiation and on November 11, 1918 an armistice was signed. On January 18, 1919 peace negotiations in Paris began. Attention was focused on what was called the Council of Ten that consisted of Wilson, French Premier Georges Clemenceau, Italian Prime Minister Vittori Orlando, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and Japan's chief representative Marquis Saionji. Almost as soon as the conference began the imperialism of the Allies clashed with the idealism of Wilson. The problem involved the German colonies in Africa, Togoland, Cameroon,

German East Africa and German Southwest Africa and colonies in the South Pacific. Britain wanted to annex these colonies because during the war the capture of them had cost the British dearly. There also was the claim that they could be used to threaten British shipping lanes if they fell back into German hands. Wilson had proposed that they be turned over to neutral countries (ie. Holland and Scandinav<sup>in</sup> countries) to administer until the native populace was able to govern. The British rejected this idea and, more importantly, the British stance violated point number five of the Fourteen Points which called for impartial adjustment of colonial claims. Secondly, it was humiliating for the Germans to lose all of their colonial claims. Wilson eventually got the British to agree on a compromise that would let the British administer the colonies but technically give the League of Nations a mandate over the colonies. The rationale here was that Britain would not annex the colonies and that Germany would have a voice in the control of her former colonies thru the League. Germany protested that this was unfair and perhaps it was, however, because the League had a mandate over the colonies there was the possibility that British administration could be challenged. What ultimately was important was that Wilson got the Conference to accept the principle of a mandate.<sup>10</sup>

Wilson was also faced with the fact that the French were more interested in first working out the peace treaty than establishing the League. He saw the League as a cornerstone and a sign that the old order was dying and that the new order was emerging. On January 25, 1919 Wilson got his wish when

the Conference agreed to establish a League of Nations as the heart of the peace treaty. The Conference also appointed the League of Nations Commission, of which Wilson was chairman, to agree upon a constitution for the League. The Commission completed a constitution in ten days and Wilson read the completed draft to the Conference on February 14, 1919.<sup>11</sup> Wilson then returned home to explain the covenant to the people and found more opposition than he thought he would encounter. Senators William Borah, Miles Poindexter and Lawrence Sherman all fiercely denounced the League as destructive of America's sovereignty and contrary to American tradition. On March 4, 1919 Senator Henry Cabot Lodge pushed through the Senate a resolution called the Round Robin which rejected the proposed League and more importantly opposed a League until after the peace settlement. Wilson responded by saying that when he came back from Paris again he would present a treaty to the Senate that would be inseparable from the League.<sup>12</sup> Later Wilson was told by William Howard Taft and Lawrence Lowell, who were strongly in favor of the League, that the League could not pass without a number of amendments. Wilson was finally persuaded to reconvene the League of Nations Commission. Wilson sought and got amendments that protected the Monroe Doctrine, and exempted domestic questions of immigration and tariffs from the jurisdiction of the League.<sup>13</sup>

We must now turn our attention to how Wilson prevented France from dividing up Germany as evidence of how things might have been worse. France was highly preoccupied with her security. She had been at war with Germany in 1870

and 1914, three times in a hundred years. France claimed the German districts of the Saar which contained rich coal-fields. France had most of her coal mines deliberately destroyed by the retreating Germans. France wanted to annex a region that contained six hundred thousand Germans. Wilson was steadfastly opposed to this because he had given Germany assurances that the United States had no intention of dividing up Germany. Secondly it was blatantly contrary to the principle of self-determination.<sup>14</sup> For awhile it appeared that peace negotiations would collapse. However, a compromise devised by Wilson saved the talks. France was given ownership of Saarland's coal mines for at least fifteen years and after this a plebiscite would be held for the people of the Saarland to decide their future.<sup>15</sup>

The next problem with France was her position concerning the Rhineland. France feared that with the Rhineland in German hands an invasion could be easily launched. France wanted to make the German area west of the Rhine, which encompassed five million Germans and key industries, an autonomous republic. Secondly, France proposed that the bridgeheads on the east bank of the Rhine be occupied for thirty years by Allied troops. Again Wilson was fiercely opposed to the French plan as contrary to self-determination. Furthermore, Wilson feared that France's plan could provoke Germany into war in the next generation.<sup>16</sup> The French again agreed to a compromise worked out by Wilson. The territory west of the Rhine would not be annexed but would be demilitarized and the bridgeheads would be occupied by Allied troops for a period of five



to fifteen years. The bridgeheads east of the Rhine would also be demilitarized and occupied for the same length of time. Wilson agreed that since the League could not offer security guarantees to France the United States and Britain would make a separate security treaty with France until the League could give France the protection that she needs. He was also careful not to regard the separate treaty with the French as an alliance, but rather of a temporary undertaking.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of reparations is one in which Wilson really failed to soften Allied demands. Wilson had said before the Conference that punitive damages should not be held against Germany.<sup>18</sup> Moreover Germany accepted armistice terms that stipulated Germany would only have to pay damages to civilians and their property. Clemenceau and Lloyd George insisted that Germany be forced to pay for the full cost of the war. Yielding to Allied pressure, Wilson agreed to expand the definition of civilian damages to include the pensions of maimed Allied soldiers and their relatives which nearly doubled Germany's reparation bill.<sup>19</sup> It is important to point out that Wilson hoped that when the League of Nations became established it would be possible to lower the reparations. This is an example of how Wilson hoped that the League would be able to correct the injustices of the treaty.

The Italians also had their claims to territory which clashed with Wilson's principle of self-determination. Italy had been promised in the secret treaty of London the territory on the <sup>Adriatic?</sup> Atlantic coast and the south which was populated by non-Italians.<sup>20</sup> Wilson went along with this claim for reasons

that are not altogether clear. Wilson may not have known what he was agreeing to or may have hoped that if the Italians were given this claim they would scale down their other ones.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the reason was it made Wilson vulnerable to criticism that he compromised on self-determination. Wilson did not go along with Italy's demand of the City of Fiume which had been promised to the Croats. This caused Italy to withdraw from the peace conference.<sup>22</sup> This embarrassed Wilson and the Japanese took advantage of the fact when they made their claim on Shantung Peninsula. The Japanese had captured this territory from Germany and forced China to give Japan the rights to the peninsula. Japan threatened to walk out of the conference if it was not allowed the economic rights to Shantung. Chinese objected that they gave the rights to Japan under duress. Wilson emerged on the side of the Chinese at first but gave into the Japanese in order to preserve the League.<sup>23</sup> It is also important to point out that Japanese only claimed German economic interests that were mostly railroads and mines. The Japanese did not want to annex the peninsula and promised to return the peninsula totally back to Japan in three years. The Shantung settlement was not a betrayal of self-determination as some of Wilson's critics in the Senate maintained.<sup>24</sup>

Why Wilson did not pursue the issue of freedom of the seas has never been altogether clear. Edward Parsons, in his book Wilsonian Diplomacy, suggests that after the war it became clear to Wilson that Great Britain would not sign a covenant that severely restricted her navy. Another reason Wilson may have given up on the idea of freedom of the seas is that America

needed to have the right to use submarine warfare if there was ever a conflict with Great Britain. Wilson also hoped that if he dropped the issue of freedom of the seas, the British might be less resistant on other issues. At any rate it is clear that Wilson was in no position to impose the notion of freedom of the seas upon the British.<sup>25</sup>

Although Wilson compromised a great deal at Paris it is easy to see why. For one thing he had few levers to pull against France and Great Britain. German military might was gone and France and Great Britain no longer needed America's army and resources. There was pressure to quickly agree upon a treaty because Europe was in shambles and her people were hungry and hungry people are often attracted to revolution. Compromise for Wilson was to avoid something much more disastrous, namely a Carthaginian peace or a Boleshevik Revolution in Europe.<sup>26</sup> Wilson was not happy with some part of the treaty. The issues of reparations in particular was objectionable to Wilson. What Wilson hoped for was that the treaty and League would be ratified and then the issues of reparations and guilt could be brought before the League.<sup>27</sup>

We now then turn to the second part of this paper which is concerned with an analysis of the senators known as the irreconcilables who were adamantly opposed to the treaty and League. Ralph Stone, in his book The Irreconcilables, sees the irreconcilables consisting of sixteen senators that can be divided into three groups. The isolationists and extreme nationalist group which consists of Senators William Borah of

of Idaho, Hiram Johnson of California, and James Reed of Missouri. The idealist group was made up of Joseph France of Maryland, Robert Lafollete of Wisconsin, George Norris of Nebraska, and Asle Gronna of North Dakota. The realists group includes Senators Charles Thomas of Colorado, Lawrence Sherman of Illinois, Joseph McCormick of Illinois, Philander Knox of Pennsylvania, Albert Fall of New Mexico, Bert Fernald of Maine, Frank Brandegee of Connecticut, Miles Poindexter of Washington, and George Moses of New Hampshire. All of the above senators were Republicans with the exceptions of Senators Reed and Thomas.<sup>28</sup>

The irreconcilables who fall into the realists group thought that the only answer in the world was military might. Furthermore, they rejected the idea of a League that was built upon a moral force. Finally, they favored military alliances with nations that had similar interests with that of the United States.<sup>29</sup> Senator Knox was the main spokesman for this group who proposed in a speech to the Senate on December 18, 1918 a new American Doctrine. This new doctrine said that any menace to freedom and peace in Europe would be regarded as a menace and threat to the United States. Furthermore, Knox thought it appropriate for the United States to enter an alliance with threatened European powers as long as the alliance had only limited obligations. Knox clearly had an alliance in his mind and he clearly articulated this on March 1, 1919 when he stated that if Germany were to wage war again America would find herself fighting for the defense of civilization. On June 10, 1919 Knox introduced a

a resolution to the Senate that incorporated his new American doctrine. The resolution attempted to separate the League covenant from the treaty and said that the United States would cooperate with European powers to remove any menace to European peace and freedom. Knox was backed by Senator Brandegee who argued that the Senate should pass Knox's resolution rather than the treaty of Versailles. Brandegee argued further that France would be satisfied with just the resolution because all she really wanted was security. Still yet another option proposed by Senators in the realist camp was made by Senators Moses and McCormick both of whom suggested support of Wilson's French Security Treaty over the Treaty of Versailles. Senator Albert Fall another member of the Knox clique critiqued the League Covenant for supposedly violating the constitution by giving the league council the authority to say when aggression had taken place.<sup>30</sup>

If one looks closely at the alternatives the senator mentioned above proposed it is not hard to see that they failed to grasp the complexity of the situation in Europe and what was at stake there. The alternative the League and treaty offered by Knox would have immersed the United States into a balance of power diplomacy. This type of diplomacy failed to keep peace and probably perpetuated war. In other words, Knox's alternative was not a plan that might have prevented war. Rather it was a policy that dictated what the United States would do if there was another war in Europe. War was simply assumed to be an inevitable thing for Knox and his followers. Wilson on the other hand, labored to start the

world's first collective security organization that might have been successful in diffusing disputes and preventing wars. The security treaty that Wilson had made with France was only necessary until collective security became established and was not a substitute for collective security.<sup>31</sup>

The irreconcilables who were in the isolationists extreme nationalist group, were probably the most vocal and well known irreconcilables. William Borah, Hiram Johnson and James Reed all thought that America should keep to herself and for the most part avoid getting entangled into the affairs of the world.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, Borah objected to the fact that the League was inabled to advise force against aggressive nations. It was also Borah's opinion that the League usurped the power to declare was from congress. Furthermore, the League would obligate the United States with matters that went against the intentions of the founding fathers.<sup>33</sup> Read argued that the League was too idealistic and was too optimistic about human nature. Friendship between men and friendship between nations were not the same thing Reed argued. He also believed that economic sanctions by the League against agressors would not be practical because nations were selfish.<sup>34</sup>

On August 19, 1919 in a speech to the Senate Foreign relations Committee, Wilson responded to some of the objections made by Borah and Reed. Wilson pointed out that article X of the covenant only empowered the League to advise on action to member nations. Nations were not forced to accept of reject the advice of the League and it in no way obligated congress to make war. On the subject of preserving existing political

and territorial independent of League members, Wilson contended that this was only a moral and not a legal obligation.<sup>35</sup> The difference between a moral and legal obligation was never made clear by Wilson.

What Borah and Reed did not realize was that the United States was becoming so wealthy and powerful that she was involved in world affairs like it or not. The United States had an immense interest in peace because war became terribly expensive. New inventions in technology had made the world so much smaller that international disputes had an effect on the had an effect on the United States. Whether or not the concept of collective security was too idealistic will never be known because the Senate rejected the treaty.

The idealists irreconcilables had big dreams for a League of Nations. They were deeply disappointed that the Treaty and League did not fully implement Wilson's Fourteen Points. They believed the treaty would freeze the status quo. Robert La Follette argued that the League Covenant did not get at the real cause of war. The League Covenant should have abolished enforced military service, outlaw war except to repel invasion of territory and put the power to make war under popular control. La Follette thought that once qualified elections had the power to make war they would realize the foolishness of huge arms build ups.<sup>36</sup> Another idealist irreconcilable, Joseph France, thought that Wilson should have invited all nations in the Western Hemisphere to a Conference that would be concerned with promoting friendship, progress, and peace. Next, France proposed that the President should have invited the

rest of the world's nations to ponder such things as self-determination, economic and educational assistance to lesser developed nations, exploitation of national resources, and over population.<sup>37</sup>

It is probably safe to say that Woodrow Wilson hoped that the League would deal with the issues that Lafollette and France raised. However, Wilson realized that one has to build from the bottom up. It would be hard to imagine Lloyd George and Clemenceau discussing things like over population, exploitation of natural resources and the like so shortly after their countries had been ravished by the worst war in history. It was understandable that security was their first concern. It can be said then that while Lafollette's and France's proposals were admirable, they were simply too idealistic at the time period.

As Arthur Link points out, the Paris Peace Conference had more to do with heroic striving <sup>^</sup>that with failure. Moreover, the peace settlement was an example of the tension between the idealist<sup>m</sup> and realism in history.<sup>38</sup> The foreign policy of this country still concerns itself with the same issues that Wilson was concerned with. Anti-colonialism, self-determination, collective security, democracy as an alternative to communism are all still concerns of this country's foreign policy in this country. The United Nations today attempt to grapple with the same issues that Wilson did some seventy years ago.<sup>39</sup>



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Levin, Gordon. Wilson and World Politics. New York: Oxford University Press., 1957. pp. 254-256.

<sup>2</sup>Osgood, Robert. "Wilson's Concepts Unrealistic Today." Wilson and The League of Nations. ed. Ralph Stone, Chicago: Halt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967. pp. 111-114.

<sup>3</sup>Levin, p. 255.

<sup>4</sup>DeConde, Alexander. A History of American Foreign Policy. New York: Charles Scribner'ssons, 1963. pp. 463-464.

<sup>5</sup>Link, Arthor. Woodrow Wilson, Revolution, War and Peace. Arlington Heights: Hanlem Davidson Inc., 1979. p. 96.

<sup>6</sup>Commager, Henry. Documents of American History. "Testimony of President Woodrow Wilson Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," Febuary 26, 1919. pp. 37-38.

<sup>7</sup>Link, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup>Stone, Ralph. The Irreconcilables & The Fight Against The League of Nations. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970. p. 21.

<sup>9</sup>Link, pp. 75-76.

<sup>10</sup>Bailey, Thomas. The Great Betrayal. Chicago: MacMillian Co., 1963. pp. 164-69.

<sup>11</sup>DeConde, p. 143.

<sup>12</sup>Stone, The Irreconcilables & The Fight Against The League of Nations. pp. 50, 70-75.

<sup>13</sup>Bailey pp. 214-216.

<sup>14</sup>Seymour, Charles. Woodrow Wilson and the World War. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921. pp. 302-303.

<sup>15</sup>DeConde, p. 474.

<sup>16</sup>Bailey, pp. 228-229.

<sup>17</sup>DeConde, p. 475.

<sup>18</sup>DeConde, p. 475.

<sup>19</sup>Bailey, p. 239. Etienne Mantour argues that Germany was financially able to pay the reparations. For a full account of the debate see his book The Carthagian Peace or The Economic Consequence of Mr. Reynes. His book is favorably review in the New York Times 20:432 July 15, 1952.

<sup>20</sup>Seymour, p. 311.

<sup>21</sup>Seymour, pp. 314-316.

<sup>22</sup>Bailey, pp. 279-283.

<sup>23</sup>Bailey, p. 284.

<sup>24</sup>Parsons Edward. Wilsonian Diplomacy. St. Louis Forum Press, 1978. pp. 172-73.

<sup>25</sup>Link, pp. 100-03.

<sup>26</sup>Carleton, Robert. "Wilson Spokesman For Today and Tomorrow;" Wilson and The League of Nations. ed. Ralph Stone, Chicago: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1967. p. 105.

<sup>27</sup>Stone, The Irreconcilables and the Fight Against the League of Nations. p. 163.

<sup>28</sup>Stone, The Irreconcilables and The Fight Against the League of Nations. p. 165.

<sup>29</sup>Ambrasivs, Lloyd. "Wilson and The Republicans and Frence Security after World War I," Journal of American History vol. 59 (1970), pp. 314-352.

<sup>30</sup>Carleton, p. 106.

<sup>31</sup>Stone, The Irreconcilables & The Fight Against the League of Nations. p. 165.

<sup>32</sup>Johnson, Clandivs. Borah of Idaho. New York: Longmers, Green and Co., 1936. p. 266.

<sup>33</sup>Stone, "Irreconcilables Alternatives to the League." p. 42.

<sup>34</sup>Commager, pp. 159-160.

<sup>35</sup>Bailey, p. 365.

<sup>36</sup>Stone, "Irreconcilables Alternatives to the League," p. 42.

<sup>37</sup>Stone, "Irreconcilables Alternatives to the League," p. 42.

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