

Introduction

VI. AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

PRESIDENT Woodrow Wilson and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, articulated two very different visions of how to make permanent America's ascendancy on the world stage and how to use America's new power to create a lasting global peace. The two men disagreed ideologically and, to make matters worse, they also hated one another personally. The Republican Lodge was angry at Wilson, a Democrat, for not having included any prominent Republicans in the American delegation to the Paris Peace Conference that produced the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Furthermore, under the Constitution, the president has the authority to negotiate treaties, but the Senate must approve them by a two-thirds majority. Lodge did not believe that he or his fellow senators had any obligation to approve the Treaty of Versailles simply because the president wanted them to do so. Nor did opponents of the League of Nations believe that the Constitution permitted them to cede the critical congressional power to declare war to an international organization. The two men shared a vision of America as an exceptional and indispensable part of the world order, but they clashed over how America might best exercise its power and authority in the postwar world.

Wilson's Senate opponents during the treaty debate were divided into groups that became known as the Irreconcilables and the Reservationists. The Irreconcilables were opposed to ratification of the Treaty of Versailles, which they saw as fatally flawed, under any circumstances, while the Reservationists were willing to consider a modified version of the treaty if it protected American rights, such as the ability to dominate affairs in Latin America, a right enshrined, they argued, in the Monroe Doctrine. Lodge proposed fourteen reservations that Wilson found unacceptable. Had the Constitution only required a simple majority for ratification, it is possible that

Wilson would have had the votes. The Irreconcilables and the Reservationists, however, had enough supporters to prevent passage of the treaty unless Wilson was willing to go back to the British and French and ask for changes. He was not, both because of the impossibility of reopening the tense negotiations in Paris and his belief that the treaty's opponents were fundamentally in the wrong.

The core disagreement between Lodge and Wilson centered on the role of the United States in the post-war world. Wilson wanted the United States to join the League of Nations and work through international bodies dedicated to peace and economic development. He argued that the war had resulted from dysfunctions in the international state system. The modern world, with its many globalized connections, needed some kind of governance structure above the state. A League of Nations could also promote democracy and freedom. Wars, he felt, were the result of autocratic regimes. Democratic states, Wilson argued, were by their nature more peaceful because democratic peoples would not vote for aggressive wars. Integrated economic systems would also give peoples and states more incentives to cooperate than to compete. Thus a more interconnected world would be a more peaceful one. These ideas remain powerful today, encapsulated in a concept in international relations known as the Democratic Peace Theory.

Lodge did not disagree with Wilson's aim of promoting peace and democracy worldwide, but he thought Wilson's approach to the problem was both naive and dangerous. States, he believed, naturally pursued their own interests. Tying American interests to an international organization was therefore a recipe for disaster, especially since the League of Nations made no distinctions at all between large states and small states. The League would therefore level the global playing field, granting small states a vote in how America behaved on the world stage. They could either vote against American action in a future conflict the United States saw as necessary or force the United States to take part in a war that Americans did not see as in their interests. Lodge thought that America, and the world, would be best served if the United States had the greatest possible flexibility in its dealings with the world. This debate

has remained at the core of American foreign policy discussions ever since, giving us yet another reason to look back a century ago to the contest between Wilson and Lodge.

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“THIS MURKY COVENANT”:
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*Henry Cabot Lodge: from Speech in the
U.S. Senate on the League of Nations*

Few political rivalries in American politics can match the enmity between Woodrow Wilson and Henry Cabot Lodge. The Constitution required that the treaty receive two-thirds approval of the Senate; and Lodge—Boston patrician, intimate of the recently deceased Theodore Roosevelt, chairman of the Republican Senate conference and of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—was hell-bent on defeating it. He hung most of his arguments on Article X, which established a collective security arrangement among members of the League. Lodge asserted that Article X would impinge upon Congress's constitutional power to declare war; and for the next few months, he would place every political obstacle that he could in the way of the treaty's passage. He would eventually offer a series of amendments and reservations, knowing full well that his idealistic adversary would never offer a single significant concession.

I am as anxious as any human being can be to have the United States render every possible service to the civilization and the peace of mankind, but I am certain we can do it best by not putting ourselves in leading strings or subjecting our policies and our sovereignty to other nations. The independence of the United States is not only more precious to ourselves but to the world than any single possession. Look at the United States to-day. We have made mistakes in the past. We have had shortcomings. We shall make mistakes in the future and fall short of our own best hopes. But none the less is there any country to-day on the face of the earth which can compare with this in ordered liberty, in peace, and in the largest freedom? I feel that I can say this without being accused of undue boastfulness, for it is the simple fact, and in making this treaty and taking on these obligations all that we do is in a spirit of unselfishness and in a desire for the good of mankind. But it is

well to remember that we are dealing with nations every one of which has a direct individual interest to serve and there is grave danger in an unshared idealism. Contrast the United States with any country on the face of the earth to-day and ask yourself whether the situation of the United States is not the best to be found. I will go as far as anyone in world service, but the first step to world service is the maintenance of the United States. You may call me selfish if you will, conservative or reactionary, or use any other harsh adjective you see fit to apply, but an American I was born, an American I have remained all my life. I can never be anything else but an American, and I must think of the United States first, and when I think of the United States first in an arrangement like this I am thinking of what is best for the world, for if the United States fails the best hopes of mankind fail with it. I have never had but one allegiance—I cannot divide it now. I have loved but one flag and I cannot share that devotion and give affection to the mongrel banner invented for a league. Internationalism, illustrated by the Bolshevik and by the men to whom all countries are alike provided they can make money out of them, is to me repulsive. National I must remain, and in that way I, like all other Americans, can render the amplest service to the world. 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 intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her power for good and endanger her very existence. Leave her to march freely through the centuries to come as in the years that have gone. Strong, generous, and confident, she has nobly served mankind. Beware how you trifle with your marvelous inheritance, this great land of ordered liberty, for if we stumble and fall, freedom and civilization everywhere will go down in ruin.

We are told that we shall "break the heart of the world" if we do not take this league just as it stands. I fear that the hearts of the vast majority of mankind would beat on strongly and steadily and without any quickening if the league were to perish altogether. If it should be effectively and beneficently changed the people who would lie awake in sorrow for a single night could be easily gathered in one not very large room, but those who would draw a long breath of relief would reach to millions.

We hear much of visions and I trust we shall continue to have visions and dream dreams of a fairer future for the race. But visions are one thing and visionaries are another, and the mechanical appliances of the rhetorician designed to give a picture of a present which does not exist and of a future which no man can predict are as unreal and shortlived as the steam or canvas clouds, the angels suspended on wires, and the artificial lights of the stage. They pass with the moment of effect and are shabby and tawdry in the daylight. Let us at least be real. Washington's entire honesty of mind and his fearless look into the face of all facts are qualities which can never go out of fashion and which we should all do well to imitate.

Ideals have been thrust upon us as an argument for the league until the healthy mind, which rejects cant, revolts from them. Are ideals confined to this deformed experiment upon a noble purpose, tainted as it is with bargains, and tied to a peace treaty which might have been disposed of long ago to the great benefit of the world if it had not been compelled to carry this rider on its back? "*Post equitem sedet atra cura,*" Horace tells us, but no blacker care ever sat behind any rider than we shall find in this covenant of doubtful and disputed interpretation as it now perches upon the treaty of peace.

No doubt many excellent and patriotic people see a coming fulfillment of noble ideals in the words "league for peace." We all respect and share these aspirations and desires, but some of us see no hope, but rather defeat, for them in this murky covenant. For we, too, have our ideals, even if we differ from those who have tried to establish a monopoly of idealism. Our first ideal is our country, and we see her in the future, as in the past, giving service to all her people and to the world. Our ideal of the future is that she should continue to render that service of her own free will. She has great problems of her own to solve, very grim and perilous problems, and a right solution, if we can attain to it, would largely benefit mankind. We would have our country strong to resist a peril from the West, as she has flung back the German menace from the East. We would not have our politics distracted and embittered by the dissensions of other lands. We would not have our country's vigor exhausted or her moral force abated by everlasting meddling and muddling in every quarrel, great and small, which afflicts the

world. Our ideal is to make her ever stronger and better and finer, because in that way alone, as we believe, can she be of the greatest service to the world's peace and to the welfare of mankind. [Prolonged applause in the galleries.]

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