



The National Archives

Colonel House and Woodrow Wilson in 1917

WOODROW WILSON *AND* COLONEL HOUSE

A Personality Study

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required the destruction of Prussian militarism, he found that Wilson "was not sure of this as it might mean the disintegration of German power and the destruction of the German nation."⁴

Nonetheless, when war was finally forced upon him and he at last made his decision to ask Congress to recognize that a state of war existed with Germany, Wilson placed his action on the highest idealistic grounds. It often has been said that Wilson's habitual practice of idealizing and moralizing his actions was to some extent consciously instrumental, reflecting his appreciation of the deep wellspring of American feeling to which one must appeal in order to mobilize public opinion. This may well be the case. But his propensity toward idealization was certainly instrumental in the first place in a more personal sense. That Wilson struggled with the conscience of the pacifistically inclined nation should not obscure the simultaneous struggle which he waged with his own conscience.

Indeed, so was he constituted that he could overcome the stubborn doubts he had so conscientiously struggled with only by replacing them with an unquestioned faith in the righteousness of America's cause. This pattern of decision-making—replacing extreme uncertainty with extreme certainty—was characteristic of the man.

The protection of America's rights against the flagrant challenge of German U-boat warfare did not present an objective sufficiently elevated to legitimize his war decision. Even when the fatal step was virtually forced upon him, Wilson could commit his leadership and his people to war only by embracing far-reaching idealistic objectives. It must be a war to make the world safe for democracy, a war to end war, a crusade to usher in a new world order. Fighting to accomplish these great ideals was the one way that Wilson could banish his misgivings about leading the nation to war. Now he turned to this tremendous task with a Messianic zeal that far outstripped his personal commitment to any goal he had ever embraced in his entire life.

CHAPTER X

UNDERCURRENTS

Unrestricted power to the President to "co-ordinate and consolidate" all the governmental activities as a war emergency is contemplated in a bill offered in the Senate late today by Senator Overman of North Carolina, an Administration supporter.

The measure, which came from the President . . . was criticised tonight as intended to provide assumption of the entire power of Government by the Executive.

Leaders in the Senate, Democrats and Republicans alike, showed anger tonight over the proposal. . . . "We might as well abdicate," said several Senators.

New York Times, February 7, 1918.

. . . The President has nearly destroyed all the work I have done in Europe.

Diary of Edward M. House, December 20, 1916.¹

WHEN THE UNITED STATES entered World War I, President Wilson openly sought that dictatorial power which his critics suspected he had covered all along. Wilson took the position that he must become the commander-in-chief of a necessarily autocratic organization; that the normal processes of democratic government must be suspended for the duration; that Congress must be willing to equip him with whatever powers he deemed necessary to prosecute the war.²

Given the task which confronted the nation, Wilson's demand for authority was not to be denied. With whatever misgivings and distaste—and there was a great deal of both—Congress entrusted Wilson with the job of mobilizing the nation's resources, in Professor Corwin's phrase, "through the simple device of transferring to the President its applicable powers."³

self to his new role and there was nothing to do but hope he could handle it so tactfully as not to offend the President.

Given Wilson's temperament, House's state of mind of the moment, and the covert hostility between Mrs. Wilson and him, the Colonel was skating on exceedingly thin ice.

CHAPTER XI

WORLD LIBERATOR

Perhaps I am the only person in high authority amongst all the peoples of the world who is at liberty to speak and hold nothing back. I would fain believe that I am speaking for the silent mass of mankind everywhere who have as yet had no place or opportunity to speak their real hearts out. . . .

Wilson's "peace without victory" address,
January 22, 1917.



WOODROW WILSON was not a man given to the display of emotion in interviews with strangers. Once in a great while, however, something so moved him that his customary self-control deserted him. One day in the summer of 1918, Mrs. J. Borden Harriman called on the President with one Mme. Botchkarova, a Russian woman who had a piteous tale to tell of the privations of her countrymen. Russia was torn by revolution. People were hungry. They needed his help. As Mme. Botchkarova made her stirring plea, tears streamed down the President's face.¹

This incident illustrates the depth and quality of Wilson's identification with humanity's suffering. He not only keenly felt the great misery of war-ravaged mankind; he was possessed of the idea that it was his God-given mission to ameliorate it by so reordering the relations of the nations of the world that never again would the plain people of this earth be afflicted with war. In his speeches he had set forth the broad moral principles which he thought must guide any peace settlement if it were to be a lasting one. By the war's end he had fastened upon one item in his program, that prescribing the formation of a league of nations, as the very keystone of the whole, until the wish

to shepherd such an organization into existence suffused all his thinking, all his feeling, all his functioning.

Historians who have examined the story of Wilson's struggle to bring about the ideal peace settlement he envisaged have been struck by the series of inexpedient actions which marked the President's effort to achieve his objective. Examined singly and sympathetically, many of his mistakes can be, and have been, attributed to lapses of judgment of the kind to which any human being working under great pressure is liable, or related to various difficulties with which he had to contend: to the strength and cunning of the European forces arrayed against him; to the difficult domestic political situation in which he had to operate; to his illness at two critical junctures in the fight for his peace program; to the immaturity of the American public's outlook on foreign affairs and its reaction, once the war was over, against crusading idealism and internationalism.

When the President's numerous errors in peacemaking are examined in their entirety, however, there remains an important residue, a common thread which links them with one another, which cannot be explained in these terms alone. However sympathetically one views Wilson's noble aspirations and his struggle on their behalf, one is forced to acknowledge, as many historians already have, that temperamental defects contributed to the President's tragic failure. At the root of Wilson's numerous blunders, both in negotiating the Treaty and later in attempting to secure its ratification, was his complicated personal involvement in the objective of an idealistic peace and a new world order.

Wilson undoubtedly faced a difficult and complex situation, both domestically and internationally, when he turned his attention to the task of making peace. To achieve his idealistic peace program in Paris and to secure its ratification at home indeed constituted immense challenges to his skill as a statesman and political leader. Yet, time and again, he was irresistibly impelled to define and structure situations confronting him in ways which excluded the very courses of action that would have best served his political objectives.

The possibility of being the instrument for bringing about an idealistic peace had appealed to the President even before America's entry into the war, and had been among his motivations in attempting to mediate between the belligerents. If Wilson had strong Messianic impulses, the situation in which he found himself, both during the war and after, invited them into the open and fed them richly. In

the days of United States neutrality, after all, there was real justification for his belief that he was in a unique position to render service to the cause of peace. The other leading powers of the world were in the grip of war hysteria, which drowned out the voices of reason and moderation. Only America, so Wilson very reasonably thought, had sufficient power and influence to stand a chance of bringing the warring camps to their senses.

As Wilson was unwillingly propelled closer to war, House tried to make the prospect more palatable by suggesting that being a belligerent would entitle America to a commanding voice in the peace settlement. As long as the United States was not yet in the war, however, Wilson was willing to confine his peacemaking activities to those open to him as head of a neutral state: his most compelling wish was to stay out of the war. But once war was thrust upon him, he was free—indeed, then psychologically compelled—to identify himself completely with the mission of becoming chief architect of a new world order.

Wilson had accepted the awesome responsibility of committing American lives and American treasure to Europe's battlefields without being convinced that the Allied cause was righteous or that until the time of America's entry into the war it was being fought over basic moral issues. He had done so without feeling justified—because he was temperamentally incapable of giving primary weight to such considerations—by the fact that the national interest demanded an Allied victory. His only means of justifying to himself his excruciating decision to go to war was to devote every last ounce of his strength to ensuring that out of the holocaust would emerge a moral peace settlement which would ensure that this would be indeed the war to end wars. The realization of such a sublime ideal was the only coin which could purchase peace of mind for him.

To this compelling motivation were wedded others, perhaps even more basic, which sprang from Wilson's urgent inner needs. He had always wanted—needed—to do immortal work. Devising a peace settlement which would prevent future wars was a task which appealed to everything within him which strove for self-vindication through accomplishment. For what greater good could a man do than engineer the end to human strife? He had always wanted—needed—to dominate. The greatness of this cause provided justification for imposing his moral purpose on the whole world. In the service of such an ideal, he could allow himself to seek control of the peace conference and to

impose his will ruthlessly upon those at home who dared question the wisdom of his ideas about the peace settlement. Organizing a league of nations was for Wilson a peculiarly appealing task. He had always been interested in ordering the political relations of men. As a boy, a youth, a young man, he had joined club after club and left in his wake a trail of revised constitutions for them. Now, in sponsoring the League, he saw an opportunity to write nothing less than a constitution for the whole world.

Already, before the war ended, certain Senators had begun to challenge his conception of the peace settlement and to proclaim their intention of exercising their constitutional power in the treaty-making process. They focussed their fire on Wilson's proposed League of Nations. This type of challenge to his authority in a sphere of activity fraught with personal significance to him set into motion that involuntary defense mechanism which doomed Wilson to a course of defiant insistence that his will should prevail. The more his critics found fault with the League of Nations, the more determined Wilson became that the League must lie at the very heart of the treaty.

Any one of the various personal motives which lay behind Wilson's commitment to his peacemaking role in general and to the League of Nations in particular doubtless would have sufficed to spur him to great effort. The confluence of these motives upon the task of peacemaking galvanized Wilson to a performance which came from the depths of his soul and engaged every facet of his being. Conscience as well as ambition and defiance dictated that he apply his entire energies to the accomplishment of his mission. The words of the student attempting to analyze Wilson's behavior do not reflect the passion—for it was nothing less than that—with which he approached his task. It is no exaggeration to say that Wilson was aflame with something akin to a religious zeal to "save mankind." Here, too, reality was the bright sun which brought Wilson's missionary ardor to full bloom. For, in fact, he was in possession of an extraordinary opportunity to exert this nation's power for the common good. The United States had no territorial ambitions to satisfy. She was involved in no embarrassing secret treaties, as were all the major Allies. Well might Wilson have felt that only he was in a position to speak for the decent and peaceful aspirations of "the silent mass of mankind" everywhere. America was emerging from the war the creditor of the world, a full-fledged power of the first rank. As this country's leader,

Wilson could legitimately expect a large voice in the peace settlement.

The trouble was, Wilson did not want merely a voice in the Conference. He wanted to be the voice. And this desire fostered a view of the other negotiators and of his task which reduced his effectiveness as a champion of his own ideals.

Wilson's peace program was embodied in a series of four speeches, the most important of which was the Fourteen Points address to Congress on January 8, 1918. These eloquent statements of America's peace objectives were designed both to reduce the will of the war-weary people of the enemy nations to continue the fight, and to rally the Allied peoples—if not the Allied governments—to a liberal peace program. Among other things, the President called for a peace of moderation, open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, removal of economic barriers in international trade, an impartial adjustment of colonial claims, reduction of armaments, self-determination and, to him most important of all, the formation of a general association of nations—the League of Nations.

In October, 1918, the Germans applied to Wilson for an armistice to be arranged with the understanding that the peace settlement to follow would be based upon the Fourteen Points and his three subsequent pronouncements. Wilson sent Colonel House to Paris to gain Allied approval of the Fourteen Points as the basis of the peace. This was a difficult assignment.

The Fourteen Points were propagandistic in character. Their appeal for "justice" was vague and sloganistic. These qualities had enhanced their appeal to enemy populations and made them a superb weapon of political warfare, but reduced their utility as a practical peace program. The Allies were reluctant to give their unqualified assent to Wilson's highly general pronouncements. To assent to such a nebulous set of precepts seemed to the Allied leaders an invitation to later difficulty not only with Wilson but with the Germans, who might one day claim—as, in fact, they did—that the peace terms violated the Fourteen Points.

Colonel House strove to meet these difficulties by having his aides draw up an interpretative commentary to the Fourteen Points. To some extent the commentary clarified Wilson's position on various problems, but it by no means comprised a well-formulated American peace program. Indeed, Wilson cautioned House that the "details of

application" of the Fourteen Points must be decided at the Peace Conference itself.* It was precisely in these "details" that the Allied negotiators were interested. House's commentary notwithstanding, therefore, the Allies feared that their acceptance of the Fourteen Points might be construed as their agreement in advance to Wilson's as yet undefined concrete terms.

Furthermore, it was perfectly plain to the Allies (as to House and Wilson too) that the division of spoils contemplated by the secret treaties in which the Allies were involved was completely out of keeping with the Fourteen Points, sketchy though they were.

Colonel House listened sympathetically to the torrent of objections which the Allied diplomats raised, but stood firm in his insistence, in the name of his chief, that the United States would be a party to a peace settlement only if it were founded on Wilson's principles. The Allies finally agreed to accept Wilson's Fourteen Points as the basis for the peace settlement except that they reserved consideration of the freedom of the seas question to the Conference and explicitly stated Germany's liability for reparations. Their commitment led to a speedy conclusion of the armistice.

Gaining this Allied commitment to the Fourteen Points was something of a diplomatic triumph for Wilson and House. The acrimonious objections which the Allies had raised and the fact that in the end they had attached two reservations to their approval, however, served to confirm Wilson's distrust of the aims of the Allied leaders. His suspicion of their purposes had a long history: it had been aroused when, to his bitter disappointment, the Allies had failed to seek implementation of the House-Grey plan of 1916, which to Wilson's mind guaranteed them a reasonable peace settlement. His distrust had been unhappily substantiated when, shortly after the United States entered the war, the British Foreign Minister had apprised him of the contents of the various secret treaties between the Allied powers. It had been confirmed once again in December, 1917, when House, in Paris for an interallied conference, had been unable to get the Allies to agree even to a broad statement of war aims consistent with Wilson's ideas. Now the reluctance of Allied leaders at the prearmistice conference to bind themselves to his moral principles lent fresh substance to his conviction that he and only he had an "unselfish" settlement at heart. Doubtless he sensed even then what the Allied leaders were to make so painfully evident to him a few months later at the Peace

Conference: that agreement on principles is not equivalent to agreement on concrete terms; that principles may be variously interpreted and cannot always be easily applied to the complex facts of reality—in short, that principles are no substitute for those concrete proposals which alone can serve as a reliable basis for intelligent discussion and unambiguous agreement.

Unless checked by him, Wilson was convinced, the Allied statesmen would betray the best interests of their peoples. They were actuated by considerations of national security, the balance of power, the quest for new colonies and new markets. To Wilson all this was immorality incarnate.

Clemenceau, left to his own devices, would destroy German power altogether. He would impose just that "victor's peace" which Wilson feared would contain the seeds of a new war. Twice in his lifetime Clemenceau had lived through German invasion of France. Germany had taken advantage of her victory in 1871 to impose upon France a Draconian peace, and since that time she had outstripped France in population, wealth and industrial skill. Now, the moment of French victory, Clemenceau thought, was the time to redress the balance. French obsession with security, the determination that France must never again be threatened by Germany, underlay the entire French approach to the peace settlement.

The British view was more moderate than the French. In a day when the English Channel still constituted a formidable defensive barrier, the British had little fear of direct German aggression. Furthermore, British foreign policy traditionally sought to create a balance of power among the continental nations, a preference which argued against divesting Germany of all power. Wilson's perception of this basic community of interest with the British was blurred by his attentiveness to the divergences which existed between them. He was repelled by the network of secret treaties in which the British were involved, the fulfillment of which would violate the Fourteen Points. He was determined to commit the British to his "freedom of the seas" doctrine whereas the British refused absolutely to agree to curtail their blockade practices, which, they claimed, were their chief defensive weapon. The British were interested in carving out new spheres of influence in the Middle East and Africa. Some of the British dominions wished to annex outright certain German colonies.

As for the Italians and Japanese, they were interested primarily in

securing the spoils of war promised them by the Allies in secret treaties negotiated during the war. Wilson was not committed to the secret treaties, and considered them inoperative insofar as they conflicted with the Fourteen Points.

To Wilson the Conference loomed as a gigantic battle between the forces of "good" which he thought he alone represented and the forces of "evil" represented by the Allied statesmen. He did not understand that the problems which required settlement at the Conference were not susceptible of solution simply by the application of universal principles of justice; that the Allied statesmen, in a very real sense, were not free agents, but were bound to their positions by a tortuous history, by old traditions of negotiation and by public opinion. Wilson could not conceive that each of the major statesmen, according to his own lights, was justified in what he was seeking. To him they were a cynical and evil crew.

Before the negotiations began, Wilson had extensively elaborated in his mind the notion that it was his duty to save the people of Europe from their own leaders and that he best of all both knew and represented humanity's interests. World-wide enthusiasm for his Fourteen Points speech and his subsequent pleas for a just peace settlement having a league of nations as its heart, helped confirm him in this conclusion.

We find him on July 5, 1918, saying privately: "... Europe is still governed by the same reactionary forces which controlled this country until a few years ago. But I am satisfied that if necessary I can reach the peoples of Europe over the heads of their Rulers." We find him on October 23, 1918, expressing gratitude to and agreement with a correspondent who had written advising him to keep "the throttle of war and peace" in his own hands and not to let the Allied leaders direct the course of the peace negotiations. We find him writing in a letter on the day the armistice was signed: "It is astonishing how utterly out of sympathy with the sentiments of their own people the leaders of some of the foreign governments sometimes seem."

Obviously, a great deal that the Allies proposed to do, Wilson properly opposed. In acknowledging the reasonableness of Wilson's rejection of some of their aims, however, we must not obscure this simple fact: that viewing the Allied negotiators as unenlightened representatives of the wicked old order of diplomacy which must be cast aside in the interests of their own peoples served handily to pre-

pare an excuse for any attempt he might make to impose his will on them during the negotiations.

On November 11, 1918, the day the armistice was signed, Wilson cabled House stating that he planned to participate in the peace negotiations personally and that he assumed he would be selected to preside over the Peace Conference. House was distressed. He had been clinging to the hope that Wilson would stay in Europe only a short while and would place him in charge of the United States delegation before the negotiations got under way. As did many of the President's supporters, House thought Wilson's peace program would have a better chance of realization if he remained in Washington, detached from the day-to-day wranglings of the Conference.

In times past, House had always scrupulously refrained from pressing a point of view which he knew Wilson would find disagreeable. This time, however, he did not deny himself. He cabled Wilson, on November 14: "Americans here whose opinions are of value are practically unanimous in the belief that it would be unwise for you to sit in the Peace Conference. . . ." House indicated further that Clemenceau did not think that Wilson should sit in the Conference on the ground that no other head of state would, and that the British concurred.

Wilson was quick to indicate his displeasure. "Your 107," he cabled back the day he received it, "upsets every plan we have made. . . . It is universally expected and generally desired here that I should attend the conference. . . . The programme proposed for me by Clemenceau, George, Reading and the rest seems to me a way of pocketing me. I hope you will be very shy of their advice and give me your own independent judgment after reconsideration." House "reconsidered" and cabled back: "My judgment is that you should . . . determine upon your arrival what share it is wise for you to take in the proceedings." Then, in response to Wilson's charge that the British and French were trying to "pocket" him, House added: "As far as I can see, all the Powers are trying to work with us rather than with one another. Their disagreements are sharp and constant."*

Privately, House expressed his disappointment at Wilson's decision to participate in the negotiations. To his diary on December 3, 1918, the Colonel confided that he wished in his soul that the President had appointed him as chairman of the peace delegation. When later that month Clemenceau called on House to tell him the Allies were

willing to agree to Wilson's attending the Conference, the Colonel confessed to his diary that he had found it difficult to simulate a satisfaction he did not feel.⁷

Wilson's cable to House is remarkable for its assertion that "it is universally expected and generally desired here that I should attend the conference. . . ." This was hardly an accurate statement. Secretary of State Lansing, for example, told the President on November 12, 1918, that he thought it would be "unwise" and a "mistake" for him to attend the Conference.⁸

At Lansing's suggestion, Vance McCormick called on the President to urge him not to attend the Conference. "Who can head the Commission if I do not go?" Wilson asked. "Lansing is not big enough. House won't do. Taft and Root are not in sympathy with our plans. I must go."* (Taft, it should be noted, was the leading light in the League to Enforce Peace, which advocated creation of a league of nations—the nub of Wilson's program.)

Wilson's political enemies were openly charging that his attending the Conference would be unconstitutional, another indication of his alleged megalomaniacal tendencies and catastrophic because he would be duped by clever and experienced diplomats. Apparently Wilson was so eager to assume leadership of the American delegation that, notwithstanding all these indications of opposition to his venture abroad, he deluded himself (or tried to, at any rate) into thinking that public opinion supported it.

On November 18, 1918, Wilson announced that he would attend the Paris Conference. He did not indicate whether or not he would serve as a delegate, although by this time he had probably decided to do so. Public reaction to this announcement was largely negative, although there was considerable sentiment that it might be useful for him personally to conduct brief preliminary negotiations.

Perhaps most significant, in view of subsequent developments, was the fact that Wilson's decision further irritated the already hostile Senate, and provided additional talking points for those who claimed that he was a colossal egotist, out to cover himself with glory. What right did Wilson have to go to Europe as representative of the American people, demanded the Republicans, when he had just been personally repudiated at the polls?—*personally* repudiated because in his October appeal he had asked for the equivalent of a vote of confidence, and had been defeated. From his deathbed, ex-President Roosevelt stated his attitude:

Our allies and our enemies and Mr. Wilson himself should all understand that Mr. Wilson has no authority whatever to speak for the American people at this time. His leadership has just been emphatically repudiated by them. . . . Mr. Wilson and his Fourteen Points and his four supplementary points and his five complementary points and all his utterances every which way have ceased to have any shadow of right to be accepted as expressive of the will of the American people.⁹

If the public reaction to Wilson's announcement that he would attend the Peace Conference was largely negative, a storm of criticism broke loose when, a few days later, he made public the names of the men he had selected to serve with him as delegates. The other American Peace Commissioners were to be Secretary of State Robert Lansing, Colonel Edward M. House, General Tasker H. Bliss and Mr. Henry White.

Of these, only White was a Republican and he, a career diplomat retired from public life for almost a decade, had never been active in party affairs. Wilson passed over such prominent Republicans as ex-President William Howard Taft, ex-Secretary of State Elihu Root, ex-Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes (who had been Wilson's opponent in the 1916 presidential election), and Dr. Charles Eliot, President of Harvard. He had also ignored the possibility of naming one or more Senators to the Commission or of inviting them along to the Conference in some other capacity.

The Republicans angrily protested that the President had failed to give adequate representation on the Commission to the party which, according to the latest national election, best represented the will of the people. Furthermore, charged Wilson's critics, the Commission was composed of "yes men," second-raters who would never stand up to Wilson and give him sound, if sometimes unpalatable, advice. *Harvey's Weekly* reflected a widespread view in its comment that the Peace Commission was comprised of Woodrow Wilson, representing himself; Robert Lansing, representing the Executive; Henry White, representing nobody; Edward M. House, representing the Executive; Tasker Bliss, representing the Commander in Chief—in other words that the only point of view given representation was Woodrow Wilson's.¹¹

A generation of historians have examined the incident and the general consensus is that the critics had good cause for complaint. Many Americans thought (and still think) that Wilson should have taken House, Bliss and White as advisers and reserved places on the

Commission proper for more important personages, including one or two Senators, whose presence might have eased final ratification of the treaty.

Historians, viewing events a generation or more after their occurrence, detached from the heat of bygone political battles and with the record of subsequent events conveniently at hand, sometimes render overharsh judgments on the errors of great men. One might wonder, therefore, whether Wilson has not been unjustly taken to task on the basis of hindsight for not having taken a few Senators or some prominent Republicans with him to Paris. The fact is, however, that at the time Wilson chose the Commission (and, it may as well be noted here, at the time he committed subsequent blunders in his dealings with the Senate) it was clear to many of his contemporaries that he was erring. Ample warnings were offered, but he rejected them. If Wilson did not recognize the folly of his action it was not because evidence of the probable consequences was lacking at the time. His blindness was a shortcoming peculiar to him. His contemporaries watched in fascinated horror as, by his own actions, Wilson fired salvo after salvo at potential Republican supporters, some of whom (Taft, for example) magnanimously tried repeatedly to provide Wilson opportunities to undo the damage he had wrought.

Wilson made his selections to the American Peace Commission in the teeth of warnings, both public and private, that he must show deference to the Senate generally, in view of its share in the treaty-making power, and to the Republicans in particular. Wilson would do neither. The reasons he gave for not accepting suggestions to appoint one or two prominent Republicans in or out of the Senate demonstrate a remarkable capacity for flimsy rationalization.

He could not appoint Senators, he told Attorney General Gregory, because the Senate is an independent body and it would not be fair or constitutional to ask a Senator to negotiate a treaty which he would later have to judge. However, other Presidents before Wilson, notably McKinley, bound by the same Constitution, had felt free to use Senators as negotiators.

Wilson knew that everything connected with the peace treaty would fall within the Senate's sphere of power by reason of the clause in the Constitution which provides that the President shall have the power to make treaties "by and with the advice and consent of the Senate." The precise lines of authority between President and Senate in this function are not clearly drawn. All through American history, Presi-

dents and Senates have engaged in tugs of war for the prize of dominance in the conduct of the nation's foreign affairs. Always alert to any real or fancied encroachments upon its powers or affronts to its dignity, the Senate has been especially alive to the slightest suggestion of presidential disregard of its constitutional prerogatives in the conduct of foreign affairs.

The difficulties of any President's position are increased by the fact that two-thirds of the Senate must approve a treaty if it is to be ratified. This means that the power of an obstructionist one-third is greatly enhanced. Numerous students of constitutional history have concluded that the present system of treaty ratification is unsatisfactory. Whatever justification there may be for such a conclusion, the fact remains that in 1918 and 1919 Wilson had to function within the existing system. The paramount need was to conciliate the Senate in order to obtain ratification of whatever treaty he presented to it.

Burdened by the usual stresses and strains between President and Senate which are inherent in our institutional arrangements for treaty-making, Wilson's task was additionally complicated by the pent-up hostilities toward him of Senators of both parties. Thus a situation ordinarily beset with difficulties was in this instance particularly delicate. So far from taking steps to solve his difficulties, however, Wilson compounded them at every turn.

Understandably, he did not want on the Commission Republican Senators like Lodge, who were so opposed to him personally that they might have deliberately embarrassed whatever attempt he might make during the negotiations to create a league of nations. This objection did not apply to a number of Republican and Democratic Senators who favored the idea of an association of nations or whose minds were at least open on the subject. It certainly did not apply to men like ex-President Taft, Elihu Root and Charles Eliot, who had publicly championed the creation of an international organization in one form or another before the President had done so.

Even if credence be given Wilson's dubious explanation of why he could not appoint a Senator or two to the Commission, it is hard to escape the conclusion that it was his purpose throughout entirely to eliminate the Senate from the treaty-making procedure. For if, unable to give that body representation on the Commission, he nevertheless wished to co-operate with the Senate so that it could exercise its duty of giving "advice and consent," one would assume that he would take steps to keep it informed of the proceedings. He did not. On the

contrary, he deliberately withheld information from the Senate. One would assume that respect for the Senate's functions would have led him to negotiate in such a way that possible Senate amendments to the Treaty would not have calamitous consequences. The fact is, however, that he was careful to negotiate so that, as he publicly proclaimed, the Senate would find it difficult to make alterations.

It mattered little to him that deferring to the Senate might save the substance of his program. The substance of his program, although sustained by a variety of personal needs and intellectual convictions which sincerely committed him to it, was in the last analysis the external vehicle of his need to dominate. His paramount requirement—though he would literally rather die than recognize the fact—was to vanquish the Senate for personal, “selfish” reasons. He must not defer to the Senate. It must defer to him. He must not surrender to Lodge. Lodge—another Dean West, another father!—Lodge must surrender to him. His very integrity was at stake!

No matter that a Taft, an Eliot, a Root could render incalculable service in mobilizing support for his League and his Treaty. Wilson could not tolerate the presence with him of men whose prestige might threaten his own pre-eminence at the Conference and whose independence of thought might lead them into infuriating challenges to his authority. It was in the nature of his commitment to the task of creating a new world order, we suggest, that some of the private satisfactions he was seeking would be forthcoming only if he worked alone. From the moment he adopted the league idea as part of his peace program he became extremely possessive of it. Many others, both at home and abroad, had been sponsoring the creation of some such international organization. Wilson steered clear of them all.

The League to Enforce Peace, for example, was an organization dedicated precisely to the proposition that there must be an association of nations to preserve the future peace. All through the war, its members worked to prepare public opinion for American participation in such an international association and to systematize the ideas of thoughtful men on the subject. This organization's leaders were among the most respected men in the United States. By August, 1918, it had enlisted thirty-four state governors to serve as its officers. It had organizations in every state of the union and a roster of fifty thousand volunteer workers.¹³ The League to Enforce Peace, in short, was a powerful voice in the nation, a voice raised in behalf of the very thing that Wilson had most at heart. Yet, Wilson frowned upon many of

its activities. “Butters-in” and “wool gatherers” he called its leaders.¹⁴ He was contemptuous of their plans for a league—plans drawn by men of the stature of ex-President Taft—although he does not appear to have studied them in any detail. He categorically opposed their composing a draft constitution for the proposed international organization. He opposed their seeking contact with similar groups in Europe.¹⁵ In his eagerness to retain personal control of the league project, Wilson could see all the disadvantages but none of the possible benefits of participation by interested elements of the public in discussion of a league.

One of the chief reasons Wilson gave for discouraging public discussion of a league constitution was that the drafting of such an instrument was a matter for government officials to deal with. The British and French, indeed, had set up official committees for just that purpose. When the British committee had completed a report which the British wanted to make public, Wilson objected on the grounds that to do so would only draw the fire of opponents of the league idea, which would make it all the more difficult to secure a desirable constitution at the Peace Conference.¹⁶

In the summer of 1917, a Frenchman, Franklin Bouillon, who had been working on a plan for a postwar international parliament, approached the President with an invitation for the United States to attend a meeting on the subject with the French, British and Italians. Wilson rejected the invitation. In his diary on September 3, 1917, House attributed the President's reluctance either to receive or send commissions abroad to his autocratic nature. Wilson believed in one-man authority, the Colonel wrote, adding that despite its advantages, benevolent dictatorship is extremely dangerous and not to be countenanced.

It was not until July, 1918, after House had warned him that unless he took the initiative, public opinion might crystallize around somebody else's league plan, that Wilson turned his attention to drafting a covenant. He found the British report unacceptable for the ambiguous reason that it lacked virility and, without any suggestion as to what his own ideas were in the matter, charged House with the task of rewriting it.¹⁷ House's draft was the backbone of Wilson's later versions, which he altered in some degree to accommodate the views he encountered at the Conference.

A fact which stands out above all others, writes Ray Stannard Baker of the documents relating to the origins of the League, is that

"practically nothing—not a single idea—in the Covenant of the League was original with the President. His relation to it was mainly that of editor or compiler. . . . He had two great central and basic convictions: that a league of nations was necessary; that it must be brought into immediate existence." "To these might be added a third conviction, perhaps the deepest of all: that he, and he alone, must be in charge of ushering the new organization into existence."

As the only Republican on the Commission, and as one who understood the crucial importance of gaining the good will of Republicans both in and out of the Senate, Henry White undertook to solicit the views of various Republican leaders before leaving for Paris. He hoped to be able to function as a tranquilizing intermediary between the President and his critics, particularly Senator Lodge, who had been a personal friend of his for many years. On December 2, 1918, Lodge obliged White with a nine-page memorandum for his guidance at the Conference. In it he warned that the proposed League must "under no circumstances" be made part of the peace treaty. "Any attempt to do this," he declared, "would not only long delay the signature of the treaty of peace, which should not be unduly postponed, but it would make the adoption of the treaty, unamended, by the Senate of the United States and other ratifying bodies, extremely doubtful." 18

Lodge sent White his memorandum on the very day that Wilson appeared before Congress to deliver his annual message. In his speech, Wilson referred to his forthcoming trip. The peace settlement was of transcendent importance both to us and the rest of the world, he declared, "and I know of no business or interest which should take precedence. . . ." American servicemen had accepted his statement of the ideals for which they were fighting. "It is now my duty to play my full part in making good what they offered their life's blood to obtain." 19

Congress received the President's words with ominous lack of enthusiasm. The *New York Times* reported that nearly all the Senators, Republican and Democratic alike, sat glumly silent throughout.

Two days later, on December 4, 1918, accompanied by Mrs. Wilson, Secretary of State Lansing, White and a corps of experts who for a year and a half, under the direction of Colonel House, had been collecting data bearing on all problems likely to arise at the Confer-

ence, Wilson embarked for Europe aboard the *SS George Washington*.

The President left behind him a clique of bitter personal enemies, likely to carp at whatever treaty he negotiated. He left behind also a group of people who so heartily approved of the plan for a league that they continued to support him in spite of personal antipathy: ex-President Taft, for example, despite his great contempt for the President's choice of Commissioners and for many of the President's actions, continued to campaign for a league. The vast majority of Americans had not yet formulated fixed opinions about the peace. Their minds were—to use one of Wilson's favorite expressions—"to let" on the subject. There existed a great deal of sympathy for the general idea of an association of nations to prevent another war and as yet very little organized opposition. As to the specific nature of such an organization, public opinion had not yet crystallized. Nor were most people greatly concerned with the concrete problems of peacemaking: such difficulties as the high cost of living, the delay in the return of one's "boy" from the army, finding new jobs now that war industries were closing down, seemed of much more immediate importance to most Americans. There was a widespread disposition to let Europeans worry about the complicated problems of Europe, and let the United States reserve all her energies for setting her own house in order.

Ahead lay Europe—the statesmen Wilson felt he must vanquish in order to gain a moral peace settlement and the millions of plain folk on whose behalf he was certain he would be acting. He approached his great undertaking with a mixture of apprehension, born of a deep realization of the magnitude of the task he had set for himself, inspirational zeal and, above all, determination to succeed.

Three days before the *George Washington* reached France, Wilson told the experts that the Americans would be the only disinterested people at the Conference, and that the other delegates did not represent their own people. The job for the United States delegation, he declared, was to achieve a new order, "agreeably if we can, disagreeably if necessary." 20

On Friday, December 13, 1918, the *George Washington* steamed into Brest. The presidential party disembarked and proceeded at once to Paris.

Men who witnessed the triumphal entry of Woodrow Wilson into

Paris said that never before on this earth had one human being been so revered by his fellows.* Frenchmen whose grandfathers had told them about the triumphant processions of Napoleon down the Champs Elysées, Englishmen who had seen the coronation of George V, Americans, Australians, Greeks, Chinese—men from all over the world—have testified that never was there a welcome to match that accorded the President of the United States when he arrived in Europe to make peace in 1918. In Paris, two million people jammed the Champs Elysées, and paid tribute to "Wilson the Just" with cheers, garlands of flowers, prayers and tears.

Wilson arrived in Paris prepared to get to work immediately. Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Orlando all preferred to postpone the opening of the Conference. Wilson readily agreed to the delay, and spent almost a month making triumphal visits first to England and then to Italy, where millions of people gave him a tempestuous welcome which made all that preceded it seem pallid by comparison. The intoxicating ovations he received undoubtedly reinforced his belief in his mission as deliverer of the common people of the world, and his feeling that he, better than their own leaders, represented the people of Europe.

It cannot be denied that there was some justification for Wilson's feeling that his idealistic pronouncements had won the people of Europe. They looked to him as to a god who could and would right all wrongs. Nonetheless there remained a considerable element of unreality in Wilson's belief that he best represented the will of the Europeans and that, if need be, he could force his adversaries at the Conference to accept his views by winning the support of the people of the several nations they represented.

Differing and complex emotions lay back of the tumultuous demonstrations for Wilson. He had given eloquent tongue to universal human aspirations. To people throughout Europe—even in the enemy nations—his very name had become a rallying point for the expression of the wish for a world of peace and justice. His presence provided a splendid opportunity for people to give vent to their relief that the war was over, their gratitude for American help, their approval of high-minded ideals in general, their joy that the all-powerful President of the United States (and they seemed to invest both the man and

* Among the Americans in Paris when Wilson arrived was Captain Harry S. Truman, on leave from the front: "I don't think I ever saw such an ovation as he received," Truman wrote in a memorandum in 1950.²¹

the country with limitless, almost magical, strength and authority) had dedicated himself to improving their lot.

What Wilson encountered was a diffuse emotional outburst which, at best, signified approval of his most general aims. He was riding the crest of that wave of good feeling which so frequently unites men to high purposes at moments of crisis and deep emotion, and which almost always proves transitory and capricious. Wilson, however, mistook the crowds' adulation for a reliable indication that they would approve his specific attitudes, not yet enunciated, on concrete problems. He had yet to learn that it was one thing to inspire a crowd to cheer itself hoarse for him, for "justice" and for the League of Nations, and quite another to gain its support in opposition to its leaders' specific demands. Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Orlando also spoke of peace and justice. If they and Wilson disagreed as to the best way to the millennium, Wilson had little reason to suppose that on specific issues he, rather than their own leaders, would have the support of the people of Europe.

In late December, 1918, two events occurred which might have given pause to a more realistic statesman than Wilson. First, Lloyd George won an overwhelming victory in the British elections, after a campaign in which he pledged to work for the Draconian peace demanded by a public full of hatred of the Germans. Second, while Wilson was in England sounding the need for a league and a new approach to international affairs, Clemenceau appeared before the Chamber of Deputies and proclaimed his adherence, in his words, to the "old system of alliances called the 'balance of power.'" He declared his unwillingness to entrust French security to the untried schemes proposed with "noble simplicity (*noble candeur*)" by President Wilson.²² The Deputies registered their approval of his position with a resounding vote of confidence.

Colonel House wrote in his diary that Clemenceau's victory constituted "as bad an augury for the success of progressive principles at the Peace Conference as we could have. Coming on the heels of the English elections, and taking into consideration the result of recent elections in the United States, the situation strategically could not be worse."²³

Wilson's evaluation of public opinion, however, seems not to have been affected one whit by these external events.²⁴ He entered the council chambers full of the exalted feeling that he represented

"humanity" and that, in accordance with God's will, he was going to construct a new world order.

While Wilson was receiving the accolades of worshipful admirers in three nations, French and Italian troops took possession of certain disputed territories and the Allied negotiators had an opportunity—for which they were most eager—to observe Wilson at first hand.

Any proficient diplomat, in formulating his strategy, takes into account the psychological characteristics of his negotiating adversaries the more effectively to advance his own objectives. The British, French and Italian leaders had worked together during the war. They had established among themselves cordial personal relations and, if not agreement on some of the problems which now faced them, at least mutual understanding of their various points of view. Wilson was an unknown quantity. His unprecedented popularity with the people of Europe as well as the conflicting stories they had heard about his personality made him a particularly intriguing mystery.

Lloyd George acknowledges frankly in his account of the Conference that the Allied leaders were curious as to what manner of man Wilson was and what his real aims were. Sir William Wiseman, a young British diplomat who during the war had won the confidence of both Wilson and House, was a rich source of information. For two hours one evening shortly before the Conference began, Lloyd George interrogated him on Wilson's personal characteristics, and eagerly took notes as Wiseman discoursed on Wilson's ambitions and susceptibilities.²⁵

To Wilson, of course, the League was, as he termed it, the "central object of our meeting," the "keystone of the arch."²⁶ Wilson's pre-Conference speeches in France, England and Italy revolved about the necessity for making a league the core of the Treaty. (He represented himself as simply the responsive instrument of American public opinion in thus preoccupying himself with the League—a claim that infuriated his opponents at home.) On the very day Wilson arrived in Paris, he told House that once the League was established, other difficult problems would disappear.²⁷

There is considerable documentary evidence to prove that the British and French also favored the establishment of an international organization. However, they attached primary importance to the substance of the specific territorial and economic settlements they were about to make. Such substantive questions Wilson regarded as signif-

icant but, after all, transitory problems which did not compare in importance to the establishment of permanent machinery to settle international disputes.

Lloyd George had his first business discussion with Wilson on December 27, 1918. He reported to the Cabinet a few days later that the President had "opened at once with the question of the League of Nations and had given the impression that that was the only thing that he really cared much about." He wanted the League to be the first item on the agenda. "Both Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Balfour were inclined to agree," state the minutes of the Cabinet meeting, "on the ground that this would ease other matters, such as the questions of the 'Freedom of the Seas,' the disposal of the German colonies, economic issues, etc."²⁸

Plainly, the British Prime Minister had gained the impression in his first encounter with Wilson that he could trade his approval for the immediate formation of a league (not a very great concession on his part, since a league was part and parcel of the British program!), for Wilson's agreement to certain British proposals, the adoption of which would conflict with the Fourteen Points. At one point in the Cabinet meeting, the Australian Prime Minister remarked that the League to Wilson was like a toy to a child—he would not be happy until he got it. The British, in their natural effort to explore every means for achieving British aims, had quickly discovered that the President had a deep personal involvement in the League which they could probably exploit.

Whether the French had come to a similar conclusion even before the Conference began—they certainly did later—cannot be established on the basis of available data. It is worth noting, however, that after speaking with Wilson for about an hour at their initial meeting on December 15, 1918, Clemenceau told Wilson that he had been opposed to his remaining at the Conference as a delegate, but now hoped the President would participate in the negotiations as the chief American delegate. To Colonel House, who escorted him downstairs, Clemenceau expressed his "keen delight" with Wilson. "This change of view on M. Clemenceau's part," Lloyd George suggests in his book, "meant that the astute French Premier had found during his conversations with President Wilson that he was more amenable than had been anticipated."²⁹

In the period preceding the opening of the Conference, White,

Lansing and Bliss, who had not been taken into the President's confidence regarding the League (or anything else), were at a loss to know precisely how most usefully to occupy themselves: the President had not even indicated how he intended to divide the responsibilities of the Conference among the Commissioners.

Lansing and White had hoped to confer with Wilson aboard the *George Washington*, en route to the Conference. To their disappointment, Wilson had had only a few desultory conversations with them which left them as much in the dark as ever about his plans.

Henry White went to see Clemenceau on the first day he was in Paris. White had once been American Ambassador to France, and they knew each other well. Apparently thinking that Wilson might use White for private exchanges of views, Clemenceau declared himself at White's disposal, day or night. Some years later, in a letter to Mrs. Wilson, White wrote that, to his great regret, he never had occasion to make use of Clemenceau's invitation: the President had given him no opportunity to help in that fashion. White also pointed out that he and his fellow Commissioners were unaware for much of the time of what was going on at the Conference, a fact which made teamwork and the rendering of any real assistance to the President impossible.²⁰

Lansing, too, tried to make himself useful in the absence of any assignment from Wilson. He had inferred (he did not know, for Wilson had never shown the Secretary of State his plan for the League of Nations Covenant) that Wilson's League Covenant contained a provision committing the United States to punitive military action against aggressors. He foresaw that such a pledge would encounter difficulty in the Senate, and drafted tentative articles of guarantee which, in his opinion, were more likely to be approved than the one he thought Wilson had in mind. Lansing submitted his memoranda to Wilson on December 23. The President never acknowledged them.

Another source of concern to Lansing was the President's apparent lack of a concrete program which would provide the Commissioners with knowledge of the specific positions the President wished them to take in dealing with the multitude of problems they would be called upon to negotiate. As the days passed and Wilson showed no sign of being even aware of the problem, Lansing undertook to bridge the gap by having the legal advisers of the Commission prepare a skeleton treaty covering the subjects likely to be discussed. When, on January 10, 1919, Lansing mentioned this project at one of Wilson's

meetings with the Commissioners, the President snapped that he did not intend to have lawyers drafting the Treaty. Lansing, being the only lawyer on the Commission (besides Wilson himself), took the remark as a personal insult, and abandoned this work. He also decided not to make any further suggestions about the League Covenant since the President had ignored previous ones.

General Bliss shared Lansing's concern about the President's failure to brief the Commissioners adequately. He wrote his wife (on December 18, 1918) that he was "disquieted to see how hazy and vague our ideas are."²¹ On January 11, 1919, he wrote Newton D. Baker that he was disturbed because he did not know the President's exact views on various problems. What would happen, he wondered, were Mr. Balfour, for example, to ask him the view of the American delegation on such and such a matter? American delegates might constantly contradict each other and seem to be in disagreement. Sometimes, wrote Bliss, it seemed to him that it would be better if the United States had only one representative.²² No more eloquent summary of the President's treatment of him could be composed than the title given by his biographer to the chapter dealing with Bliss at the Conference: "His Wisdom in Shackles."²³

In varying degrees, all of Wilson's colleagues on the Commission were distressed at their relationship with the President even before the Conference began. Lansing, White and Bliss were vexed by Wilson's obvious unwillingness to permit them to share in the real work of the Conference. Only Colonel House enjoyed the President's confidence. Only to House did the President confide his plans. He sought the Colonel's advice and informed him in detail about conversations with various statesmen. He used House to sound out his European colleagues, and to smooth out difficulties. On January 1, 1919, House wrote in his diary:

The President and I transact a great deal of business in a very short time. He seldom or never argues with me after I have told him that I have looked into a matter and have reached a conclusion. He signs letters, documents and papers without question.

House's attitude toward Lansing, Bliss and White seems to have been one of faintly contemptuous pity. He wrote in his diary (on January 8, 1919) that although his fellow Commissioners were willing to help, they were in fact a hindrance. The President, he continued, seemed to have no intention of using them effectively.

It is the story of Washington over again. We settle matters between the two of us and he seems to consider that sufficient without even notifying the others. I feel embarrassed every day when I am with them.

Each morning, Commissioner White would present himself at the Colonel's office to receive whatever news House was willing to communicate to him. House thought, as he noted in his diary, that there was something pathetic in White's eager efforts to keep informed.² An offhand note in his diary on February 21, 1919, to the effect that he had asked White to attend a meeting in his stead because nothing of importance was to come up, eloquently bespeaks his attitude. When Lansing consulted House about the advisability of drafting a skeleton treaty, the Colonel encouraged him to undertake the project in order to keep him busy, as he noted in his diary (on January 3, 1919).

As we have seen, his preferred status notwithstanding, House, too, was dissatisfied with the President. The core of his disaffection seems to have been his desire himself to head the United States Peace Commission.

By mid-January the Allies were ready to begin work. Wilson, too, was eager to start. Paris was crowded with delegates from all over the world, with representatives of a thousand different causes, each seeking a chance to plead his case, and with a veritable army of newsmen. The stage was set. The principal actors each had a rôle he wished to play. Together—out of their hopes and fears, reactions to one another and to a myriad of pressures—they were about to create one of the great dramas of human history.

CHAPTER XII

THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

You can imagine, gentlemen, I dare say, the sentiments and the purpose with which representatives of the United States support this great project for a League of Nations. We regard it as the keystone of the whole program which expressed our purposes and ideals in this war and which the associated nations have accepted as the basis of the settlement. If we returned to the United States without having made every effort in our power to realize this program, we should return to meet the merited scorn of our fellow citizens. For they are a body that constitutes a great democracy. . . . We have no choice but to obey their mandate. . . . We would not dare abate a single part of the program which constitutes our instruction.

President Wilson, January 25, 1919, to a plenary session of the Paris Peace Conference.¹



ON JANUARY 12, 1919, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Orlando and Wilson held their first official meeting. Each was accompanied by his foreign minister. It was this group of men, later joined by the two leaders of the Japanese delegation, M. Matsui and Viscount Chinda, which comprised the Council of Ten. The Council met every weekday, except one, for a little over a month, until February 14, when Wilson left the Conference for a brief visit to the United States.

The chiefs of delegation of the five great powers—Great Britain, France, the United States, Italy and Japan—quickly decided that they should maintain strict control over the proceedings and decisions of the Conference. The Council of Ten would decide what subjects the Conference as a whole should consider. Preliminary decisions on the