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League of Nations: A New Hope



Speaking before the U.S. Congress on January 8, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson revealed the last of his Fourteen Points, which called for a “general association of nations...formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” Wilson voiced the wartime opinions of many diplomats and intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic who believed there was a need for a new type of standing international organization dedicated to fostering international cooperation, providing security for its members, and ensuring a lasting peace. With Europe’s population exhausted by four years of total war, and many in the United States optimistic that a new organization would be able to solve the international disputes that had led to war in 1914, Wilson’s vision of a League of Nations was wildly popular. However, it proved exceptionally difficult to create, and Wilson left office never having convinced the United States to join it.

The idea of the League was grounded in the broad, international revulsion against the unprecedented destruction of the First World War and the contemporary understanding of its origins. This was reflected in all of Wilson’s Fourteen Points, which were themselves based on theories of collective security and international organization debated among academics and politicians before and during the war. After adopting many of these ideas, Wilson whipped up mass enthusiasm for the organization as he traveled to the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, the first President to travel abroad in an official capacity.

Wilson used his tremendous influence to attach the Covenant of the League, its charter, to the Treaty of Versailles. An effective League, he believed, would mitigate any inequities in the peace terms. He and the other members of the “Big Three,” Georges Clemenceau of France and David Lloyd George of the United Kingdom, drafted the Covenant as Part I of the Treaty of Versailles. The League’s main organs were an Assembly of all members, a Council made up of five permanent members and four rotating members, and an International Court of Justice. Most importantly, the League would guarantee the territorial integrity and political independence of member states, authorizing the League to take “any action...to safeguard the peace,” establish procedures for arbitration, and create the mechanisms for economic and military sanctions.

The struggle to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and the Covenant in the U.S. Congress helped define the most important political division over the role of the United States in the world. A triumphant Wilson returned to the United States in February 1919 to submit the Treaty and Covenant to Congress for ratification. Unfortunately for the President, while popular support for the League was still strong, opposition within Congress and the press had begun building even before he had left for Paris. Where Wilson and the League’s supporters saw merit in an international body that would work for peace and collective security for its members, the League’s detractors feared the consequences of involvement in Europe’s tangled politics, now even more complex because of the 1919 peace settlement. In March 1920, the Treaty and Covenant were defeated by a 49-35 Senate vote, and the United States never joined the League of Nations.

Most historians believe that the League operated much less effectively without U.S. participation than it would have otherwise. Additionally, growing disillusionment with the Treaty of Versailles diminished support for the League in the United States and the international community. Wilson’s insistence that the Covenant be linked to the Treaty was a blunder; over time, the Treaty was discredited as unenforceable, short-sighted, or too extreme in its provisions, and the League’s failure either to enforce or revise it only strengthened U.S. congressional opposition to working with the League under any circumstances. However, the coming of World War II once again demonstrated the need for an effective international organization to mediate disputes, and the United States supported the founding of the new United Nations.