



“We Want a Wilson Peace”: 1919-2012

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ONE MONTH AFTER THE war ended, the USS *George Washington*, escorted by a flotilla of ten American battleships and twenty-eight destroyers, approached the coast of Brittany in northwestern France. It carried the American delegation to the Paris Peace Conference led by President Woodrow Wilson. When the President disembarked at Brest on December 13, 1918, he met sunny streets lined with flags and laurel wreaths, listened to the warm drone of Breton bagpipes filling the air, and heard shouts of “Vive Amerique! Vive Wilson!” echoing above the crowd. “Huge numbers of people,” historian Margaret MacMillan writes, “many resplendent in their traditional Breton costumes, covered every inch of pavement, every roof, every tree. Even the lampposts were taken.”

For six months in 1919, Paris was the capital of the world, and “Wilsonianism” embodied the hopes of hundreds of millions of people. Rejecting the traditional “balance of power” politics that had failed to prevent the Great War, Wilson approached international diplomacy from a new angle. Might would not dictate terms, he insisted: principles would. “Peoples and provinces are not to be bartered about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were mere chattels and pawns in a game,” he told Congress. “Every territorial settlement . . . must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned, and not as part of any mere adjustment or compromise of claims amongst rival states.” There would be no more secret treaties, armaments would be reduced to a minimum, and colonial peoples would be freed from imperial control according to a new Wilsonian concept: “self-determination.”

Representatives from almost every nation and people flocked to Paris to present their petitions to the peacemakers: for a restored Poland, a free Belgium, a Jewish state; an Arab republic free from British and French control; a free Ukraine, a Kurdish state, and a free Armenia. Petitions arrived in favor of rights for women and blacks; a Japanese proposal for a racial equality clause; a state for the south Slavs (or “Yugoslavs”). Queen Marie of Romania came in person to argue for Romanian land claims, and even a cook in Paris’s Ritz Hotel lodged a proposal for the freedom of his people, the Vietnamese, from French imperial rule. He would later become known to history as Ho Chi Minh.

The meeting in Paris, which ran from January to June, 1919, appeared to be very much like the global conference ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, following his father’s lead, had argued for almost forty-five years earlier. In 1875, shortly after the end of the Franco-Prussian War, which had slaughtered 600,000 men and led directly to the World War, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá castigated the European states who had permitted such a catastrophe to break out on their so-called civilized continent. “Is it right and proper that peoples among whom, diametrically opposed to the most desirable human behavior, such horrors take place, should dare lay claim to a real and adequate civilization?” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asked. “No, by the Lord God! Even a child can see the evil of it.”

“True civilization will unfurl its banner in the midmost heart of the world,” he wrote in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, “whenever a certain number of its distinguished and high-minded sovereigns — the shining exemplars of devotion and determination — shall, for the good and happiness of all mankind, arise, with firm resolve and clear vision, to establish the Cause of Universal Peace. They must make the Cause of Peace the object of general consultation, and seek by every means in their power to establish a Union of the nations of the world.”

The core of Woodrow Wilson’s peace proposal seemed to be just that: a new, permanent international governance organization called the “League of Nations.” Margaret MacMillan explains Wilson’s sentiments: “If it could be brought into being, then everything else would sooner or later fall into place. If the peace terms were imperfect, there would be plenty of time later for the League to correct them. . . . And for future generations the League would oversee general prosperity and peace, encouraging the weak, chiding the wicked and, where necessary, punishing the recalcitrant. It was a pledge that humanity was making to itself, a covenant.”

“This supreme and noble undertaking — the real source of the peace and well-being of all the world — should be regarded as sacred by all that dwell on earth,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had written. “In this all-embracing Pact the limits and frontiers of each and every nation should be clearly fixed, the principles underlying the relations of governments towards one another definitely laid down, and all international agreements and obligations ascertained. In like manner, the size of the armaments of every government should be strictly limited, for if the preparations for war and the military forces of any nation should be allowed to increase, they will arouse the suspicion of others. The fundamental principle underlying this solemn Pact should be so fixed that if any government later violate any one of its provisions, all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission, nay the human race as a whole should resolve, with every power at its disposal, to destroy that government.” In short, ‘Abdu’l-

Bahá argued, only a binding global collective security pact, where national sovereignty would no longer operate as each nation's guiding principle, could form a lasting peace.

But a covenant of such sacred importance had to be built on trust, something that was sorely lacking in Paris. When the French proposed that the League should have the power of compulsory arbitration, the mandate to impose economic sanctions on recalcitrant states, and, ultimately, its own coercive military power, the British and the Americans balked. Surely the French wanted the League to be an armed coalition against Germany. The U. S. Congress would never consent to a plan that would allow some other authority to decide where and when America must go to war, and, besides, America would never trade away the Monroe Doctrine, which gave it supreme power in the western hemisphere. The British and French prime ministers, David Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau, didn't even attend the consultations about the League, and Winston Churchill, the young British Secretary of State for War and Air, thought that the League would be "no substitute for the British fleet." In the end, even the watered-down League of Nations — no coercive power, its hands tied by the requirement of unanimous agreement — could not pass the Republican-controlled United States Senate. Woodrow Wilson had a stroke and spent the remainder of his presidency as a virtual invalid.

The legacy of the Paris Peace Conference, both the triumphant and the tragic, continues to this day. Wilsonian idealism survives as one of the poles of present-day foreign policy; the notion that international order should be based not on power, but on rights, has become a basic assumption of the modern world. But both the League and the Treaty of Versailles that created it failed disastrously. Rejecting Japan's call for a racial equality clause in the final agreement set that country on a path of militaristic expansion. Blaming Germany for a war that all of Europe was, more or less, responsible for created bitter resentment that brought a Fascist government to power. Tenuous postwar financial engineering generated the Great Depression. And the mistrust between the capitalist West and the Communist Soviet Union, the Vietnam War, the conflict over Israel and Palestine, the genocidal collapse of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, the wars in Iraq, and the rise of political Islam, can all be traced back to that six-month stretch of diplomacy in Paris in 1919.

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

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